



Overcoming beef farming challenges

Ciarán Lenehan continues his update on the challenge aspect of the current phase of the BETTER farm programme

In last week's edition, we outlined some of the new aspects in the BETTER farm programme. This time around, we are going further than just technical efficiency and gross margin, following overall business viability, cashflow and labour efficiency.

A "challenge" aspect has also been introduced to give the reader a more concise package and allow them to easily

follow progress in areas of interest to themselves.

Essentially, all of the farms will be undertaking any challenge that is applicable to them, but for the purpose of the BETTER farm programme, challenges will be assigned to farms that require the most work and/or are representative of prevailing issues nationally.

There are 10 challenges and the first five were outlined last week – two-tonne grass growth, farm finance, farm safety (these three are mandatory), breeding and herd health.

The other five challenges are outlined here, with participants giving an update on their progress.



John McSweeney with local B&T adviser Anthony Dineen and BETTER farm programme manager Alan Dillon (right). John is participating in the Green Farming challenge.

The challenges



The soil health challenge

The aim of the soil health challenge is to encourage a greater national uptake in soil fertility testing. Participants will be selected to represent prevailing regional soil types and nutrient statuses and detailed play-by-play accounts of relevant inputs will be documented in the *Irish Farmers Journal* such that readers can emulate. Participants must have 70% of soils index 3 for P and K, or greater, in year four. The average soil pH on farm must be at least 6.3 by year four (5.5 for peat soils).

Sean Hayes, Co Clare

- ➔ Based on winter 2016 soil tests.
- ➔ Twenty per cent of the farm (64ha) optimum for pH, 50% for P and 45% for K.
- ➔ Using 18:6:12 on deficient and 27:2.5:5 on index 3 grazing ground; using 0:7:30 on silage ground; lime to go out when ground conditions improve.
- ➔ Farm will be sampled annually to monitor progress.



Sean Hayes.



The green farming challenge

The green farming challenge demonstrates practical ways of incorporating clover into 20% of the farm's grassland swards and disseminates best-practice advice on how to manage swards to ensure high-establishment rates and grazing practices to avoid issues such as bloat.

John McSweeney, Co Cork

- ➔ Broadcast 25kg of white clover seed across 1.5 acres using fertiliser spreader.
- ➔ Mixed with 10:10:20 fertiliser (in field to prevent settling).
- ➔ Aberherald and Aberace varieties.
- ➔ Established in June.
- ➔ Good establishment so far.
- ➔ Planning to do more next year.



John McSweeney.



Meet the markets challenge

This is to demonstrate the importance and value of complying with relevant carcass specifications, including age, weight, fat class, conformation, breed and organic/conventional status.

Joe Healy, Co Meath

- ➔ Slaughtering bulls under 16 months of age on the QPS grid.
- ➔ Must adhere to carcass weight limits – regular weighing of cattle.
- ➔ Fat cover must be above 2= in order to avoid penalties and qualify for conformation bonus.
- ➔ Farm is quality-assured.



Joe Healy.



The mixed-grazing challenge

To establish a blueprint for operating a mixed-grazing system (cattle and sheep), providing concrete guidelines for factors such as autumn closing dates to allow for early spring turnout, low-cost fencing options for mixed grazing in a rotational manner and housing/winter feeding options.

The Grieves, Co Donegal

- ➔ Closing up fields in October for ewes (150) and lambs next spring.
- ➔ In previous years, sheep were given the run of the farm for winter.
- ➔ Spread two tonnes of N fertiliser in late August to build up grass covers.
- ➔ Incorporated sheep fencing, temporary and permanent, to enable the operation of a paddock system for sheep.



Gerard Grieve.



John Grieve.



VIDEO ONLINE
watch the video on
farmersjournal.tv



The farm structures and labour challenge

This is to show that successful family and non-family partnerships can become established businesses that – with planning and structure – can provide

a viable future for young farmers.

We will also attempt to quantify labour requirements on participant farms and demonstrate how a productive, streamlined suckler/beef enterprise can provide a worthwhile return on any time invested.

Nigel O'Kane, Co Galway

- ➔ Currently recording labour hours for one week/month.
- ➔ Erected new shed that connects other buildings in the yard.
- ➔ Includes modern handling unit.
- ➔ Went from AI to stock bull this year

because of time pressure.

- ➔ Will move back to AI and use synchronisation.
- ➔ Running paddock system on outfarm – cattle are handled and moved much more easily.



Nigel O'Kane.

Good forecast can reduce silage pressure

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Average grass growth on our beef farms was down at 22kg DM/ha for the last seven days. However, grazing is a pipe dream for many at this stage. Even those on the driest farms report that a lot of cattle are in off the land.

Thankfully, there are decent conditions forecast for the coming days. This may afford farmers a chance to get young stock back outdoors. In truth, this is the best environment

for them and we need to try as best we can to graze off a good portion of the farm (60%) by next week.

Try hard to make this happen. If needs be, go into lighter covers, keeping an eye on the area that you are getting through. Continue to supplement young stock with 1-2kg at grass to make up for the energy deficit arising from low grass feeding value and cooler temperatures. However, take this into account when setting up your grazing allocations – grass intake will be somewhat reduced by meal in the diet.

There might be an oppor-

tunity to get lime and potash (MOP) out during the weekend on very dry ground. Two tonnes of lime/acre would lift pH from 5.5 to six on a dry, sandy soil. Up to twice this amount would be needed for the same effect on heavy clay soils.

Fodder

I carried out three fodder budgets with farmers this week and all showed up deficits when we applied the “sluggish spring” scenario. Even though one of the farmers was still grazing most of his cattle, he was working from a slight deficit.

Many will take the “sure

they’re in now, they can stay in” thought process from here on in despite the good weather that we are promised, but in reality we should be looking to take pressure off where we can. Turn lighter stock or stores back out if the ground allows, taking every precaution to minimise stress. Weanlings that have been off the cow for 10 days or more and are well settled could get back to grass too.

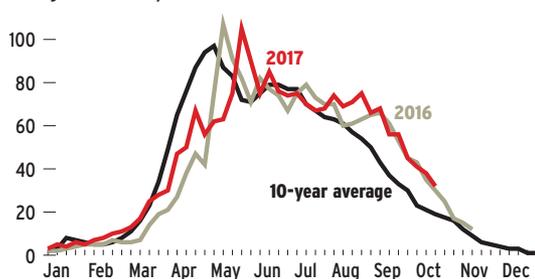
Animals destined for slaughter within a couple of months, or weanling bulls being targeted for an under-16-month slaughter, should not be turned back out at this point.



Source: PastureBase Ireland, Agrinet and Irish Farmers Journal.

10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day



John Heslin
Derrypatrick Herd, Co Meath

System	suckler to beef
Soil type	mixed
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	721
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	12
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	43

Thankfully, there is no major damage in Grange following recent storms. However, there was a power outage resulting in no electric fences for a couple of days. Some calves took advantage and headed towards the sheds where their dams were housed. Power has since been restored and the calves have settled well.

In order to ensure 60% of the farm is grazed by the end of the first week of November, the target is to graze ~13% of this farm each week. Despite the reduced grass demand on farm last week (cows in), 19% of the farm was grazed. The target was exceeded by grazing some priority paddocks and drier paddocks that had low grass covers. For the week ahead, grass demand has reduced even further as all cows are housed and should see a smaller percentage of the farm grazed.

Ground conditions have deteriorated dramatically over the last week. In total, 30mm of rain fell over the last seven days.



John Grieve
Co Donegal

System	suckler to weaning
Soil type	heavy
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	809
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	23
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	17

All cattle are now housed and we have over 50% of the farm closed for next year. The majority of this ground will be saved for cows and calves in spring. We have 30 heavy lambs left and these have now been housed and will hopefully be sold in the coming weeks.

Ewes are at grass and breeding has gone well so far. We had hoped to get lime out but the wet back end has hampered our plans. Soil fertility is something we hope to tackle over the duration of the programme and we've spread a lot of 18-6-12 this year. Thankfully we have ample amounts of fodder having carried out a fodder budget in early October. Silage results came back last week, with our second-cut silage surprising us, having a good DMD value of 73%. The dry matter for both samples is low, which we expected as it didn't get much of a wilt prior to ensiling. The protein levels of both samples came back very low unfortunately so all weanlings kept this winter will receive 3-4kg of a 16% protein ration.



Maurice Hearne
Waterford

System	suckler to bull beef
Soil type	variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	551
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	27
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	18

The continued wet weather has left ground conditions extremely difficult and as a result grazing out is proving a challenge. Calving is almost complete at this stage and thankfully it went fairly well. Breeding is back under way and it is going good too. I am running four different groups for breeding. Two separate groups are running with Charolais stock bulls. I am using AI on another group with the aim of breeding replacements and my replacement heifers, which had three weeks of AI before my Limousin stock bull joined them. Last week during the bad weather I had to house the AI group as they started poaching. I separated them and their calves to break the bond, and I suckle them twice daily to try and get the cows back into heat quicker. All calves are being vaccinated for IBR and pneumonia intranasally from two weeks of age as I had a few issues with pneumonia at the same stage last year. Last year's autumn-born bulls are currently on ad-lib meal for finishing on the grid (U16 month).



Kieran Noonan
Co Cork

System	suckler to store/weaning
Soil type	heavy
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	n/a
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	n/a
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	n/a

The storms here knocked a few trees but thankfully that was the height of the damage. AI began here on 20 October and I brought cows and calves in to make things a bit easier. Calves are being let in to suck twice daily and have access to a grass paddock beside the shed. They're very content there and spend most of the day outside.

I housed them last Thursday. It was a bad day and so not ideal. Thankfully, there were no major problems. My silage budget is telling me that I'm going to be short. I am looking to buy 100 bales now before everyone starts looking for them next spring. I have 69% DMD silage for my autumn calvers and am supplementing fresh calvers and first calvers with 1.5kg of the same 16% barley-beef mixture that the yearlings are getting.

In terms of AI bulls, I'm using Blues (ZSD, RWS) at the start. I find there's a demand for them in July and August but then it drops off. After these I'll use F276, LM2321, LM4302 and AGB (Limousin) and Charolais (FSZ).