Lean towards leaf to get most from swards

CIARÁN LENEHAN
BEEF SPECIALIST
clinehan@farmersjournal.ie

Our measuring farms grew an average of 45kg DM/ha/day this week, ranging from 15 to 59kg DM/ha/day. This figure is slightly back on the 10-year average for the week and ahead of last year, when growth rates were initially slow, but doubled in just seven days in May, leading to an average of 45kg DM/ha/day.

We want our cattle grazing grass when it hits the three-leaf stage, soon after this the leaves begin to die and the ratio of stem-to-leaf increases. Stommy grass contains 20% less energy for the animal than leafy material.

The next time you move cattle, pull up some grass plants from the new paddock. Are there three green, healthy leaves present?

Next week, in the final page of our grassland management Farmer Know-How series, we look at remedies for farms with too much or too little grass at the moment. The previous two editions of the Irish Farmers Journal contain step-by-step guides on actually measuring the farm.

At the moment, we should have 12-14 days’ worth of grass on the farm – meaning if growth were to cease, we could keep cattle fed for a fortnight. At current growth rates, a grass plant will be producing a new leaf every seven days after tight grazing – so we should be aiming to leave a paddock and be back in 21 days later.

Rate of new leaf appearance depends on grass growth rate, so we aim to stretch our rotation in slower growth periods and likewise reduce it by removing paddocks when growth accelerates.
New Longford BETTER farmer is trying to decide when to calve his suckler herd, writes Claran Lenehan

Robert Abbott keeps a herd of 35 suckler cows on a single 30ha block of land near Edgeworthstown in Co Longford. At present, the herd’s calving pattern is split between spring (March-April) and late summer (July-August) and this aspect of Robert’s system is fast becoming the main subject of debate for the management team – when is the best time for Robert’s cows to calve?

This year, 22 cows slot into the spring herd and 11 in summer. While split herds like this can help with cashflow, Robert is keen to move to a single calving period.

“I think if I had a hundred cows it would make sense to split into two, but I don’t!”

Robert used to start calving in January and February, but stopped this year. He felt like he was being caught out with bad springs more often than not and February became a fire-fighting exercise with pneumonia and scour setting in. Our housing facilities are decent, but can’t accommodate big numbers of young calves. The land here is mixed in terms of how early you can get significant numbers of stock out. I took the decision to push back into March and April and wouldn’t go back. It might seem strange for a guy trying to sell weanlings to be advocating later calving, but when all is taken into account it was definitely the right decision,” Robert said.

One thing that surprised Robert when he let calving slip back was how easy it was to keep the spread tight. All but three of his spring cows have calved in just over a month. The most crucial period for a suckler cow is between calving and conception. This is not a time when we want to stress her and have weather, bad silage, a scarcity of grass and repeated rehousing will all do this. By calving slightly later, we are breeding slightly later, which means that cows should have a longer period outside in likely better weather conditions, eating high-quality grass. We are affording her reproductive system every chance to recover and get going again in time to maintain, or even reduce her calving interval.

Many split calving spreads come about by giving empty cows a second chance and Robert admits that this led to his own split. However, he was quick to discover that summer calving has its benefits too.

“To be honest, it felt like a great time to be calving cows. They came to a paddock near the house in the days before calving and I never had to assist one last year. Only a couple of cows actually went inside. After a day or two in this maternity paddock they went back down to the main group. I ran them with the spring calvers for a few weeks post turn-out and thereafter followed the spring herd with the summer cows. This was to stop them getting overweight in the runup to calving and also meant that I never had to push the spring group too hard to graze tight – which would’ve benefitted them too. I didn’t have to vaccinate the summer calvers for scour either, as the risk was lower.”

Adviser comment

John Greaney

The calving pattern was highlighted on our first visit to Robert’s. Decent facilities exist already and he’s in a good position to go all spring calving. Gaining cheap weight at grass is the cornerstone of all beef systems and with a tight calving spread he’ll have a more uniform bunch of stock at grass to facilitate this. As he works off farm on a weekly basis and has a young family, it makes sense to simplify the system.

Spring or summer debate in Longford

Spring-born calves on Robert Abbott’s farm.

Spring calving

Pros

- Getting as much grass into the diet as possible
- Cheap winter feed requirement for cow – using her own reserves which were built up at grass
- Ideal for weaning sellers who cannot carry calves over winter
- Calves are stronger to capitalise on jump in cow milk yield

Cons

- Big demand for grass at time when conditions are variable
- Often pressure on housing facilities
- Calving health can be an issue in inclement weather/sub-standard sheds
- Feed and straw costs rise when turnout is delayed

Summer calving

Pros

- Typically ideal weather for young calves
- Minimal requirement for facilities
- Cows can be weaned in spring and held indoors to reduce grazing pressure
- Longer days can suit herding in part-time operations
- Cows are often ‘fitter’ for calving themselves
- Cows can be used to clean-up behind other stock groups

Cons

- Must feed cow well over winter to drive calf performance
- Often breeding cows indoors – can facilitate AI
- Cows can be weaned in spring and held indoors to reduce grazing pressure
- Body condition can be difficult to manage
- Cows are often ‘fitter’ for calving themselves
- Cost/kg of beef produced on the farm is generally higher than in spring

Guide to traffic lights

Fixed costs:

- €350/ha
- €550/ha
- €850/ha

€/hr worked:

- As prop of net profit
- €12.50/ha
- €12.50/
- €5/ha

Cashflow:

Consecutive months without sales – incl. sheep

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