

Some farms will need a growth burst

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Average grass growth on our measuring beef farms was 46kg DM/ha/day last week. This matches the figure for the same week in 2016 – a poor year for early growth.

What's different is the shape of the curve. This year's grass growth has only become sluggish in recent weeks, after a kick at the beginning of April, while 2016's growth came late, albeit in a relatively linear increasing fashion. Cumulative grass growth for this year will still be well ahead of last year

on most farms at this point. What's frustrating is that we would expect to be in the 60s and beyond at the end of a typical April, and while some farms have reached these heights, the cold wintery snaps we're still experiencing intermittently have largely kept the handbrake on growth rates. It's extraordinary just how contrasting grass situations are across the island. On the same day that certain farmers were baling paddocks to keep tabs on grass quality, we received pictures of fields blanketed in snow.

At this point, both the good and average grassland managers could be getting tight for grass. The good grassland

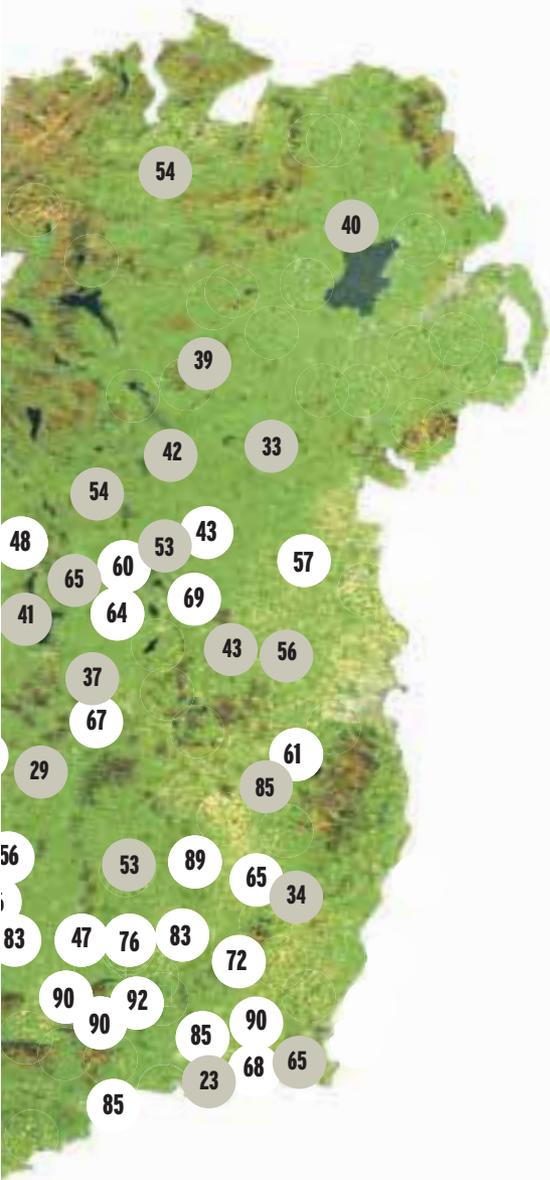
manager may have paid close attention to his days-ahead targets and subsequently not have achieved the growth rates that these targets revolve around.

On a farm with a grazing demand of 65kg DM/ha per day – a growth rate traditionally hit in mid-April – the days-ahead (farm grass supply) figure will be shrinking fast at a 46kg DM/ha growth rate. The target is to have around 13 grazing days ahead of cattle on the farm at this point, but this figure depends on grass growth matching or exceeding demand. This is why it is vital to know both grass demand and growth rate – walk the farm.

The average grassland manager may have licked the farm clean in the back-end and put out very little fertiliser thus far in 2017 as they knew that turnout would be late. After mass exodus of cattle from sheds in the last few weeks, grass that had built up in the spring will be disappearing fast, and the poor growth and potential lack of nitrogen could spell sluggish recovery.

Luckily for both of our grass managers, temperatures are expected to pick up during the weekend.

There should be a good response to fertiliser applications over the weekend, though pay attention to the weather forecast in your area.



James Flaherty
Co Kerry

System: suckler to weanling
Soil type: variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 1,378
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 42

Due to delayed turnout and high covers on farm at beginning of the year, we are in surplus at the moment. I took out two paddocks as bales last week. An extra day wilting and tedding the crop made for good-quality, high-dry-matter bales. I will take more bales out as the weeks progress.

My silage quality is an area that needs to be improved on, and I intend cutting all silage out as bales at an earlier date than in previous years. I spread half a bag of urea on all land I could travel early in February, and I am following up a cut or grazing with 1.5 bags of 18-6-12.

All calved cows are out at grass, and while our stocking rate is lower than we would like I am going to use this year to get my grassland in order for the higher stocking rate I anticipate in future. Late-calvers will be culled, while cull cows will be fattened off grass in July.



Harry Lalor
Co Laois

System: suckler to bull beef
Soil type: mostly dry
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 937
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): n/a

It's all go here at the minute, but thankfully we're finally approaching the end of the calving and lambing season. Grass is steady but we've yet to really see it explode here with the paddocks just greening up nicely of late. We didn't really get the kick from urea that we would have hoped for in early March. All silage ground is closed two weeks at this point with the hungrier (low-index) ground getting three bags of 18-6-12/acre, which will be topped up with straight nitrogen next week. The ground high in phosphorus got 3,000gallons/acre of very watery slurry, along with 19-0-15.

We took advantage of the fine spell in weather last week to sow beet and barley. We decided to blood sample 10% of the herd prior to breeding season, and they came back with a slight deficiency in cobalt. Cobalt has a negative effect on fertility, and a bolus has since been administered to all cows.



Cathal Breen
Co Wexford

System: suckler to steer beef
Soil type: heavy clay
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): n/a
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 65

Grass is in plentiful supply on the farm, as we are currently building stock numbers. Calving is nearly complete at this stage. There was a slight issue with crypto a few weeks ago, where cows were calving indoors. We have since moved any of the cows that were left to calve to a paddock close to the yard, and thankfully there have been no problems with the last few calvings.

All of the grazing ground got a bag and a half of 18-6-12 three weeks ago, in order to build P and K. Silage ground has been closed for two weeks and it received around 2,000 gallons of slurry and three bags of cut sward per acre. There were 30 dairy bred calves purchased, which are doing very well. They will soon be put back to once-a-day feeding. A number of yearling steers have been purchased and have joined our own stock. Over the last few weeks a lot of work has taken place to increase paddocks and improve grass utilisation.

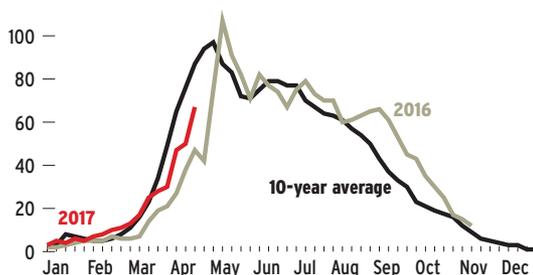


Ger O Dwyer
Tullamore Farm, Co Offaly

System: Suckler to beef
Soil: Variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 643
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 30

We currently have 109 cows calved with 107 live calves. We had one still birth and we lost one calf at six weeks with a liver abscess. We had three C-sections all in heifers and five veterinary assists. We assisted 22 cows at calving and 79 cows calved unassisted. We currently have three cows left to calve. Grass growth is a little slower than expected at 30 kg DM/day, but demand is running at 34kg/dm/day. Grazing ground has received 72 units of nitrogen/acre. We spread one bag/acre of 18:6:12 this week on the grazing block to boost some low P and K levels on paddocks. We currently have 19 days ahead of stock and we have nine acres out for reseeding, which was completed last week using a stitching machine and 48 acres closed for first-cut silage. Breeding started in heifers last Monday and is starting in cows next Tuesday 2 May. We are using AI for five weeks and then stock bulls for six weeks.

10-year average grass growth
kg DM/ha/day





Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal

BETTER FARM BEEF CHALLENGE

White fields aplenty in Castlebaldwin

Glen McDermott is well on the way towards meeting his BETTER targets already, writes Ciarán Lenehan

All of the new BETTER participants share a common goal – to reach their potential as beef farmers. However, each and every one of our new farmers has a different journey ahead of them. Some are much further along the road than others in terms of meeting their targets.

Glen McDermott is lucky in the sense that, for the purpose of the BETTER farm programme, he has a lot of the ground work carried out already.

In recent years, he and his son Dillon (16) have invested time, effort and money in the farm. From an infrastructure point of view, both grazing and animal accommodation, there is not a lot left to do. In contrast, the vast majority of our other BETTER farmers are busy fencing and installing drinkers at present, with some breaking rock, or contemplating doing so, on new buildings.

Thirty-eight divisions

The 41ha farm is split into two blocks, in close proximity to one another. There are currently 40 suckler cows on the farm, with calving evenly split between spring and autumn. Soil here is relatively free-draining for the area.

“I have made a big effort here on the grassland front in recent years. There are 38 grazing divisions on the farm at the moment and I’m actually planning a few more in the coming weeks. We have

roadways in too, though they’re simply fenced channels – we haven’t put a surface on them. These are to facilitate AI-breeding when cattle are out,” Glen told me.

In creating more grazing divisions, Glen has afforded himself the opportunity to grow and utilise much more grass, as well as keeping top-quality material under his animals. However, there is still a lot of work needed before the farm can grow big volumes of grass. While 100% of soils are optimum for P and 63% for K, the farm’s soil pH is on the floor at 5.27 on average – none of the tests taken returned an optimum pH (≥ 6.3).

“While obviously frustrating, I’m told things could be a lot worse from a soil fertility point of view. Lime is a cheap and cost-effective fertiliser. I’m not beating around the bush; so far in 2017, I’ve spread 86 tonnes of the stuff to try and sort this out. We went with 2t/acre on the grazing area around a month ago. I will spread the silage ground after it’s cut,” said Glen.

In a pool of over 13,000 samples collected by Teagasc nationwide in 2015, soil lime status (pH) was deficient in over 60% of cases. What’s worrying is that soil pH is typically cheap and easy to correct relative to poor P and K indices. In the *Irish Farmers Journal*’s recent €150/cow challenge, we outlined some of the stand-out facts on the benefits of correcting soil pH:

- ➔ Every extra tonne of grass utilised on a drystock farm increases net profit by €105.
- ➔ 5t/ha lime applied to soil with a low pH increases grass production by 1.5t DM/ha in the following two-year period, even when P and K levels are sub-optimal.
- ➔ When pH alone is corrected from a low baseline on any grassland, regardless of P and K status, grass production should increase by around 10% without any additional fertilisers or differing management.
- ➔ Application of 7.5t/ha of lime to a low-pH soil will increase the stocking carry capacity of the ground by 100% by year four in a four-year programme as well reducing the synthetic nitrogen fertiliser requirement by the equivalent of €4,900 worth of CAN.
- ➔ Lime can provide a 6:1 return on investment in its application where it of lime/ha/year is applied over a five-year period.

To date, on top of his lime applications, Glen has spread 23 units (urea) of nitrogen across the farm (early-March) and is following stock with a half bag of an 18-2.5-14 mix that contains sulphur (2%). He closed his silage ground in early April and spread 2,500 gallons of slurry and



Glen’s son Dillon herding stock in late-April. There are currently 40 suckler cows on the farm, with calving evenly split between spring and autumn.

Table 1: Glen McDermott’s AI sire selection for 2017

	Breed	Terminal index € (reliability)	Calving difficulty % (rel.)	Carcass weight kg (rel.)	Maternal index € (reliability)	Daughter milk kg (rel.)	Daughter calving interval days (rel.)
Terminal sires							
Fiston	CH	150 (95%)	6.8 (99%)	37 (99%)			
Gedeon	CH	130 (82%)	9.6 (95%)	40 (86%)			
Cavelands Fenian	CH	122 (94%)	5.8 (99%)	32 (99%)			
Maternal sires							
Curaheen Gunshot	SI	130 (43%)	6.1 (44%)	36 (45%)	172 (40%)	9.8 (38%)	-0.22 (35%)
Auroch Deuter	SI	93 (68%)	5.5 (93%)	22 (68%)	154 (51%)	11.3 (30%)	-0.29 (37%)
Clonagh Frosty King	SI	117 (49%)	4.8 (48%)	36 (54%)	136 (47%)	10.2 (49%)	0.67 (41%)



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* Guide to traffic lights

Fixed costs:
● <€350/ha
● <€550/ha
● >€550/ha

€/hr worked:
 (as prop of net profit)
● >€12.50/hr
● <€12.50/
● <€5/hr

Cashflow:
 (consecutive months without sales - incl. sheep)
● <5
● <7
● >7

Adviser comment John Greaney

Lime was highlighted as a serious issue with the pH in some paddocks as low as 4.9. In fairness to Glen he didn’t hang around and started spreading lime straight away and I’ve no doubt he’ll see the rewards later in the year and over the duration of the programme. Teagasc research has shown where soil pH was lifted from 5.5 to 6.3 grass production increased by at least an extra 1 tonne DM/ha annually.

Glen, who is ably assisted by his son Dillon, has a good foundation already in place and they’ve some really nice stock on the ground this year from using AI. The long term goal would be to go away from the weaning system but a certain number of weanlings will have to be sold in late summer/early autumn to boost cashflow. Producing top quality silage for his autumn calving cows is also a priority this year.

three bags of 18-6-12 per acre. Given that he has an autumn-calving portion of his herd, making top-class silage is high on his agenda. He will move to take his first cut in late May, weather permitting.

“One of the first things the team and my local B & T adviser Peter Mullen looked at was silage quality for my autumn cows.

They need to be able to rear a heavy calf for me and go back in-calf quickly, and for that I need high-quality feed going into them during the winter – for the sake of my wallet, preferably not barley.”

Calving 40 cows at present and selling weanlings, Glen is adamant that if he gets his grassland right he will be able to calve 60 cows and finish some, or all, of the progeny. He plans to maintain the 50:50 split. This year all of his autumn cows are in-calf to terminal Charolais sires such as Fiston, Gedeon and Cavelands Fenian. The immediate plan is to sell these calves live as weanlings during the summer to help farm cashflow. In contrast, the spring herd will receive Simmental sires like Curaheen Gunshot, Auroch Deuter and Clonagh Frosty King this year. The idea of this is to produce replacements for both the spring and autumn herds, with male calves entering a conventional under-16-month bull finishing system post-weaning. When selecting his bulls he was sure to choose dual purpose sires – he needs animals that will do well both in the cow herd and the finishing pen. On the cow end at present, Glen has been using maternal AI sires for a number of years and is confident that he will achieve a heavy weaning weight, upon which the success of an under-16-month bull system often hinges.



VIDEO ONLINE
watch the video on farmersjournal.ie

Glen McDermott, Co Siago

Fixed costs

●

€/hr labour

●

Cashflow

●

Calving pattern	Split spring and autumn
Farm system	Suckler to weaning
Farm size	41ha
2016 gross margin	€330/ha
Land type	Free-draining loam with some peaty grey areas