

BETTERfarm

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Rain helping late season growth on drier farms



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The rainfall from last week has helped to improve grazing conditions on the programme farms with dry land. In the south east, the drought-like conditions have had the biggest impact, causing swards to burn up over recent weeks.

But there are also dry farms in the north east and south west of the country that have been affected by a moisture deficit. Grass covers have been falling off as swards have become burned.

The rain has helped swards and re-growths to 'green up' again, especially where fertilizer has been applied and there is plenty of residual nitrogen still present in the soil.

While it is late in the growing season, grass growth will recover to seasonal average levels of 30kg to 40kg DM/ha.

To relieve the grazing pressure on the drier farms, spring calves have been

weaned to reduce cow intakes. Some farms have opted to feed straw, or hay, at grass to slow down the grazing rotation. Calves have been receiving concentrates to keep liveweight gains from dropping.

On some of the farms, heifers and steers that are due to be slaughtered in December have been housed for intensive finishing.

If these cattle were to remain at grass for another month, and not reach slaughter weight off grass, the slaughter date would likely need to be pushed back to account for an acclimatisation period when housed and the finishing period.

Where cattle have been housed, they have been eating concentrates for approximately one month prior to

housing to reduce the impact of a changing diet.

The finishing ration being used is low in protein (12% to 14%) and high in energy as these cattle have developed sufficient frame. The high energy levels (UFL =0.9+) are required to ensure cattle are properly finished at fat class 3.

Farms have found that over winter, on/off grazing

of light weanlings and calves has helped to improve animal health and performance. In preparation for this winter, paddocks closest to the winter housing are now being saved for grazing in November and December. Tetany is still a risk for cows in milk. Magnesium licks are still the main method of prevention as well as regular herding of cows for early detection.

Table 1: Converting growth rate into kilos of liveweight per hectare/acre

	Daily growth rate kg/DM/HA						
	20	30	40	50	60	70	80
Kg/LW/HA	700-1,000	1,000-1,500	1,400-2,000	1,750-2,500	2,100-3,000	2,450-3,500	2,800-4,000
Kg/LW/Ac	280-400	420-600	560-800	700-1,000	850-1,200	1,000-1,400	1,100-1,600



ON THE GROUND

Marty Lenehan

“Marty's system has developed on getting excellent weight for age in weanlings”

Over the past few years, Marty Lenehan has set up his suckler enterprise to produce bull weanlings for sale at 10-11 months of age. His system has developed on getting excellent weight for age in his weanlings to maximise output and cover the cost of keeping the suckler cow. Having animals with high growth potential and a high herd health status is also attracting repeat buyers for his stock.

Liggan,
Ballinfull,
Co Sligo



fort to breed replacements with more milk. Artificial insemination is also used to improve calf quality and performance.

The autumn herd calves from 1 August to 15 October, while the spring herd calves from the 1 January to 17 March. Breeding for the autumn herd is due to start this year on 1 November. Cows will get two services to AI before they go to stock bull to cover any repeats.

FARM DETAILS

Marty farms 66ha of grassland. Only 6.5ha (16 acres) of land is actually owned. Renting ground makes a farming business vulnerable to expanding in numbers and investing in land improvement. Marty works closely with local adviser, Tom Coll and programme adviser Shane McHugh to make the most of this suckler enterprise.

The average farm stocking rate in 2012 was 1.85LU/ha, compared with 1.71LU/ha in 2009 when Marty joined the

BETTER Farm programme. Output/ha in 2012 was €1,189, while the gross margin was €565/ha. Variable costs are running around 52% of gross output.

The 100 cow suckler herd is split into 48 autumn calving and 52 spring calving cows. Cow type is a mix of continental breeding as replacements are purchased annually. Cows are served with a Charolais stock bull and a Simmental stock bull. The Simmental bull was purchased in 2012 in an ef-

AUTUMN CALVING

Autumn calving is generally considered as being a more expensive system than spring calving, as cows are generally fed concentrates once housed. On Marty's farm, the herd is split for two reasons; ➤ A limitation on housing means that there is insufficient accommodation for 100% spring or autumn calving. ➤ The limited land availability means the grazing block would not be capable of carrying a 100% spring



calving herd at the current stocking rate.

Dry cows are grazed behind priority stock from turnout until one month prior to calving. They are then moved to rough grazing and brought back to the yard to calve in the days prior to the calving date.

Once calved, Marty ensures that the calf has sucked the cow within 30 minutes after birth. The cow then goes back to older graz-

ing for a fortnight post calving, after which, she is then moved to high quality grass until housing time.

In Marty's system, the autumn calving cows are not feed any meal once housed. They are placed on a diet of ad-lib high quality silage which was analysed at 72 DMD and 11.1% protein last winter. It is Marty's belief that if high quality silage cannot sustain the suckler cow in milk, then the cow

is not doing the job she was bred for. The autumn cows are weaned indoors in early March, ahead of the grazing season.

SPRING CALVING

Once calved, the spring cows are moved onto ad-lib silage. Again, no concentrates are fed to the cows after calving, but in recent years, the cows have been fed 0.5kg/day of soya (€480/t) for up to four weeks prior to calving.



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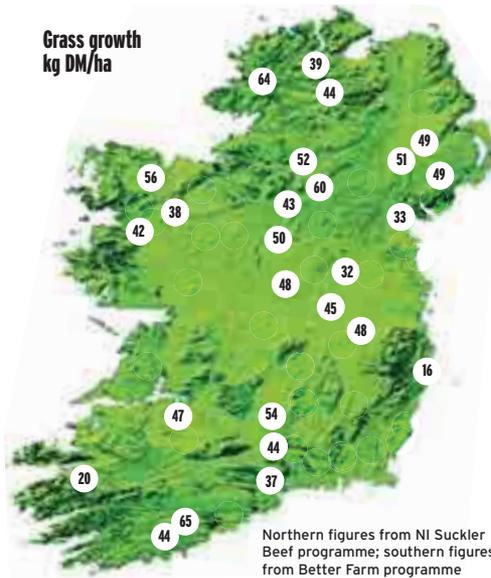
WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Rain has helped to improve grass growth on drier farms.
- ➔ Where grass is still in short supply, hay and straw is being fed to slow up the rotation.
- ➔ More spring calving cows have been weaned to reduce the grazing demand.
- ➔ Heifers and steers due to be slaughtered in December have been housed on some farms for intensive finishing.
- ➔ Tetany is still a risk on farms.

➔ Where spreading slurry before the closed period, only spread on paddocks that have been properly grazed out. Spreading on medium (5cm to 8cm) or heavy covers (9cm+) of grass will reduce the palatability, therefore reducing cattle intakes.

TOP TIP

Grass growth kg DM/ha



Northern figures from NI Suckler Beef programme; southern figures from Better Farm programme

FARMER FOCUS

Tom Halpin Co Meath

Growth has slowed a little in the last two weeks with colder nights setting in. The block of ground I am measuring has a current demand of 45kg DM/ha/day of grass, so I will reduce this by taking some cattle off to another block.

The group of summer calving cows are also getting a bale of hay to hold them in a paddock for an extra day, slowing the rotation up. I also felt this would help safeguard against tetany in the cows.

Spring-born weanlings will be split up this week into a group of bulls and heifers. At the end of the week, I will also start weaning.

This year, I am going to take out a few cows out of each bunch and house them for a few days. I have seen this done on a few farms of late and it seems to work very well.

While some may question weaning February/March



born calves, I feel I will be able to keep the calves out longer than I would if the cows were still with them.

Having completed a fodder budget last week, I should be okay for next winter. One thing I intend to do is to make our cows work harder this winter.

The spring calving cows have never been in better condition and silage quality should be very good. I am going to restrict these cows' silage to about 30kg of silage per day and offer straw as well. This will hopefully reduce fodder requirements and also reduce potential calving problems.

Weighing of calves and silage sampling is due to take place next week. Rams have been out for six weeks and 90% of ewes have been tipped which should leave lambing in 2014 fairly tight.

I took the decision on veterinary advice to vaccinate the cows and ewes for Schmallenberg virus. I felt it was too big a risk to take by not vaccinating.

Cathal Crean Co Wexford

The rain forecast for this week will be most welcome to help build grass covers on the farm for the next rotation. I have received very little rain on the farm all summer. As a result, grass growth has struggled.

However, I did achieve exceptional grain yields during the harvest with some fields of spring barley yielding in excess of three tonnes/acre. As grass growth was low in July, I decided to wean 20 of the oldest, and therefore heaviest, calves in early August to reduce grazing demand.

I also weaned a second batch of 23 cows and calves during the first week of September. The calves were fed 1kg/day of concentrates and were separated into bulls and heifers. This proved very successful.

I could give the calves the best grass on the farm to maintain their performance, whilst the dry cows cleaned out the paddocks after. I spread a bag of CAN/acre in mid-September

and the grass is coming along well. Along with the rain, this should help build a bank of grass.

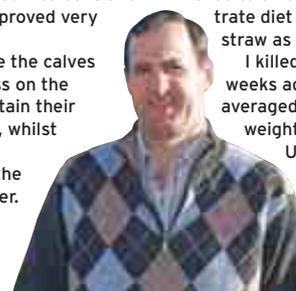
I slaughtered 12 of my strongest 2012 spring-born heifers off grass in August. I picked them in early July based on size and condition.

They were supplemented with up to 4kg/day of rolled barley for six weeks. On average, they killed out at 322kg carcass weight and graded R+ 3=.

I housed my 2012 spring-born bulls during the first week of July for finishing. They were built up to 4kg/day of concentrates at grass over a fortnight before housing.

They were then fed high quality baled silage, harvested from paddocks late May, and 10kg/day of concentrates until September. They were then moved to an ad-lib concentrate diet with access to straw as roughage.

I killed 13 bulls three weeks ago and they averaged 405kg carcass weight and graded U= 3-. I hope to slaughter the remainder within the next few weeks.



Spring born bull weanlings on Marty Lenehan's farm that will be sold in late October at 10 months of age. The target sale weight is 400kg and the group averaged 360kg on 17 September.

needed to gain condition before winter.

Spring cows get priority grazing throughout the spring and summer. Calves are allowed to creep graze ahead of the cows from mid-summer onwards, which helps to break the cow and calf bond. The calves are then weaned from August onwards by slipping cows out of the group. Once weaned, the calves are moved to high quality grazing and silage aftermaths on the home farm in preparation for sale.

FEEDING COST

Assuming that the cow is eating 60kg/day of ad-lib silage (€30/t) over a 150 day winter, the feed costs for Marty's autumn cows is €270/cow.

Cows are fed to meet target body condition during the summer months, while dry, and restricted grazing prior to calving.

In contrast, the spring cows are on restricted silage intakes of approximately 30kg/day until calving. Assuming the cows are on the restricted silage diet for 75 days and on ad-lib silage for 75 days, the cost of feeding for the spring calving cow is €202.50/head on Marty's farm.

The stocking rate at grass for the dry autumn cows is 1.25 animals/acre. The spring cows are stocked at

one cow/acre. As they are used to clean out paddocks, autumn cows have a lower grazing cost than a spring cow in milk. Fertilizer costs for the grazing season is approximately €78/acre, which consists of two bags of 18-6-12 (€460) and two bags of CAN (€340/t).

Dividing these grazing costs to one third autumn calving, and two thirds spring calving, brings the annual feed costs for the autumn cow to €296, while the spring cow has a year fed cost of €268.50. It must be noted that these costs are for Marty's farm only and exclude costs for land rent, fixed costs and mineral supplementation.

WEANLING MANAGEMENT

Both the spring and autumn calves have access to outdoor grazing throughout the winter. Autumn calves get 1kg of ration over the winter until two weeks after weaning in March. Meal is then re-introduced again in late July at the same rate. Bulls are built up to 3kg/day from mid August to sale in mid September.

This year, a group of 13 autumn bulls were sold at an average weight of 522kg at 10 months of age on 17 September. The sale weight is 11kg heavier than 2012 sale weights of 511kg. At a sale price of €2.60/kg, the 2013 bulls generated an average sale value of €1357 with a total of €90 worth of concentrates fed in the animal's lifetime on farm.

Excluding the three lightest bulls from the group increases the average live-weight to 560kg. The autumn heifers weighed 420kg on the same day and were sold in

late September.

The spring born bulls were weaned at an average liveweight of 310kg in early August. On 17 September, they ranged in weight from 276kg to 497kg and the group had an average weight of 360kg. Concentrates were fed at a rate of 2kg/day from two weeks prior to weaning until five weeks post weaning.

At this point, the concentrates will be increased to 3kg/day until sale in late October at a target weight of 400kg. Taking the same sale price of €2.60/kg at 400kg, these weanlings will generate €1040/head. Approximately 220kg of concentrates (€260/t) will be fed to each weanling, which amounts to €57 to deduct from the sale value.

KEY POINTS

- While Marty's system will not be applicable to everyone, when good genetics and grassland management is in place, livestock can perform to their potential. Good grassland silage management offers considerable cost savings to the suckler system. In Marty's opinion, his system has room for improvement but the key strengths of his system are:
 - ➔ The spring system is cheaper to operate but his autumn weanlings produce more liveweight/ha.
 - ➔ The split herd maximises land use, labour and housing.
 - ➔ High quality silage is crucial to avoid feeding concentrates to the cows.
 - ➔ Cows with good milk potential are essential for heavy weaning weights.
 - ➔ Know when to sell cattle. Do not be tempted to keep holding for a higher sale price.

At a cost of €14 per cow, Marty is convinced that this is money well spent as colostrum quality is improved. As Marty ensures the calf has sucked the cow within 30 minutes after birth, the calf automatically gets the benefit of the colostrum and disease and mortality is reduced. Marty aims to wean the cows in August. This allows priority to be given to calves while cows can also be given preferential treatment if