

BETTERfarm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Housing period under way after heavy rain



KIERAN MAILEY
LIVESTOCK SPECIALIST

Heavy rainfall in the past week has led to heavier cattle being housed on some of the programme farms. Light cattle remain at grass. Conditions are reported as being difficult in the west and in the north

of the country. Daytime temperatures are still warm so it is important that cattle being housed are not stressed, are housed in dry conditions and do not overfill sheds.

If only the heavier cattle are being housed, make use of all cattle pens in the shed by spacing animals out. They can be tightened up later. This will not be applicable to strong bull weanlings, however, as they will become aggressive if they are mixed with strange cattle.

In general, cattle that have been housed are dry cows, heavy steers and heifers. Wet grass will have a lower dry

matter, which reduces the amount of energy in grazed grass, so the cattle will need a higher level of supplementation to maintain performance; otherwise, they will lose condition.

Housing these cattle for a finishing period of 60 to 80 days will be more cost effective on a 550kg steer. Round bale silage is predominantly being fed to cattle while housed as there would not be enough animals housed to justify opening the silage pit just yet.

Bales are also being fed outdoors to some groups of stock on lush grass to offer some

“Cattle should be moved at the same time each day to prevent further sward damage or further unsettling of animals

form of roughage to animals. Where possible, bales and meal are being fed on hard-core laneways to minimise the amount of ground damage from stock.

Silage samples are being

taken from the farms to determine feed quality.

The analysis will then be used to formulate a proper balanced winter ration for both growing cattle and finishing cattle. Just because silage was made in relatively good conditions does not necessarily make it a high quality feed.

Silage quality will depend on the age of the sward, the amount of leaf and seed heads present when cutting and how well it was managed when it was ensiled.

The farms will target silage with 70+DMD to finishing stock and autumn calving

cows. Silage with 66 to 70 DMD will be fed to weanlings and balance with concentrates to target liveweight gain of 0.5kg/day to 0.75kg/day.

On the farms where cattle remain outdoors, grass utilisation remains the key issue. As grass becomes wet, cattle are becoming quickly unsettled and will tend to walk the perimeter fencing.

Cattle should be moved at the same time each day to prevent further sward damage or further unsettling of animals. Delaying moving by a few hours means that the animals will be hungry and again they will become restless.



ON THE GROUND DONAL SCULLY

“The time of year at which the animal is born will determine how much liveweight gain from grass is possible”

Generating a profit from finishing bulls under 16 months will be heavily influenced by the price of concentrates. But concentrate price alone will not make the system economically viable.

Being able to graze the animals so that they gain 250kg to 300kg of liveweight from grass is also important.

The time of year at which the animal is born will determine how much liveweight gain from grass is possible. In a March calving system, the animal will be more expensive to finish as a bull at 16 months as the animal will have spent over nine months of its lifetime indoors.

Autumn calving is better suited to 16-month-old bull beef systems as the animal is at grass during the bull's main growth phase.

Donal Scully has adapted this calving pattern to suit a grass-based system and the demands of having full-time employment off the farm.

Banogue, Bruree,
Co Limerick



The system is run efficiently.

There is one questionable aspect to be reviewed and that is the timing of sale which coincides with the end of the grazing season in November. Donal is working closely with his programme adviser, Alan Dillon, and local Teagasc adviser Derek O'Donoghue, to budget on when is the best time to market his cattle.

FARM DETAILS

Donal farms 29.5ha (73 acres) of grassland which is located in one block around the main yard. The farm carries a

suckler herd of 40 cows which started calving on 1 July and finished on 7 October. Herd fertility is good with 35 cows calved down in a nine-week period and a calving interval of 367 days.

This year, 18 heifers are being served to increase the herd size to 50 cows. They are a combination of homebred and bought-in dairy cross animals.

As the land base is restricted, Donal does not have the scope to carry heifers to 36 months before they calve. Therefore, all replacements calve into the herd at 24 months.

Cows are predominantly Limousin and Simmental cross. A new Limousin stock bull was purchased in 2012 with the intention of keeping replacements.

The bull was bred by Ronick Hawk which is proven for maternal and carcass traits. The herd is also bred to AI with Limousin and Blue sires selected for use.



The bulls have gained 1.96kg/day from housing until 21 October and have an average liveweight of 630kg. 48% of this liveweight came from grass this year.

COW GRAZING MANAGEMENT

The herd is operated in a leader follower system. Cows are dried off indoors and return to grass when there is sufficient grazing available.

The cows are used to clean out paddocks to keep grass quality high in the following rotation for priority stock such as bulls and heifers.

Around six weeks to one month prior to calving, the dry cows are tightened up into one group on bare pasture and supplemented with minerals.

Around two weeks pre-

calving, the cows return to the paddocks surrounding the shed.

They are then housed on straw and minerals at night to aid supervision.

A cow with any kind of temperament issue is housed permanently at least one week pre-calving. Once calved, the calf is tagged straight away, has its naval treated with iodine and made to suck the cow, then turned out to grass within one to two days after birth.

Cows are naturally milky, so after calving they are turned out to rough grazing

for a fortnight before moving to high quality grazing.

First calvers go straight to good grass and may be supplemented with a ration if grass is in short supply, or if the heifers are losing body condition.

COW WINTER MANAGEMENT

Once housed, all cows are offered ad-lib silage which is usually around 68 to 70DMD, but the analysis for 2013 has shown silage to be 73DMD.

Concentrates are fed at a rate of 2kg/day (16% protein) to thin cows and first calvers. The remaining cows are fed



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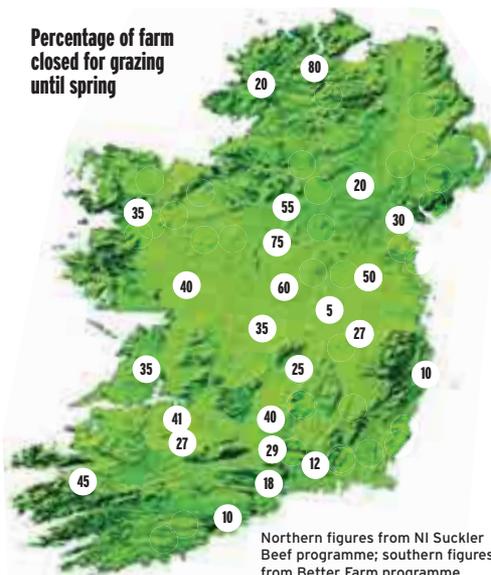
WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Heavy rainfall has led to some heavier cattle being housed on wetter farms.
- ➔ Weanlings will remain at grass on these farms to graze out the remaining heavy grass covers.
- ➔ Bales made from surplus grass in summer are being fed as the demand is not high enough to open the silage pit.
- ➔ Silage samples are being taken on farms.
- ➔ Winter diets will be based on the analysis from silage samples.

Clipping the backs of cattle will help to prevent them from sweating when housed. When clipping cattle, give the clippers three runs either side of the animal's spine rather than just one run along the back. Clip around the top of the head also.



Percentage of farm closed for grazing until spring



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

FARMER FOCUS

James Strain Co Donegal

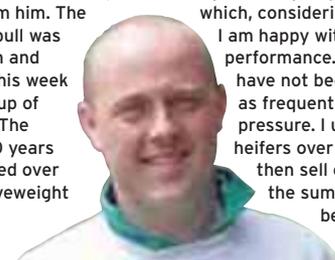
Heavy rainfall last week has made ground conditions just that bit more tricky to manage so I housed my dry cows on Saturday last. My cows are autumn/winter calving so they would be normally housed first just to make it easier to observe them as they come close to calving. The heifers have just started calving. I bought in 10 dairy cross heifers last year to bring milk into the herd. There are four left to calve before the main herd of 35 cows starts calving in November. The scanning results indicate that the herd will be finished calving by mid-January. I purchased a new Charolais stock bull last year and this will be the first crop of calves from him. The old stock bull was a Limousin and was sold this week with a group of cull cows. The bull was 10 years old, weighed over 1,000kg liveweight and made €1,850.

If only all stock bulls lasted like this. The cull cows had a variation in price but I am happy overall with the sale value. Traditional dairy cross cows weighing 640kg sold for €1,000 with good continental cows at 798kg selling for €1,400. I sold six yearling bulls out of the yard in the past month. The average weight of the group was 485kg and they made €2.45/kg.

I have another 10 bulls which are close on 10 months of age to sell in the coming weeks. I plan to weigh them shortly. Anything over 400kg will be sold. The bulls were weaned in mid-June and gained 1.82kg/day from June to September on grass.

Concentrates were fed at 2kg/day from weaning onwards. The bulls have averaged 1.28kg/day since birth which, considering the spring,

I am happy with their performance. The heifers have not been weighed as frequently due to time pressure. I usually carry heifers over winter and then sell off grass in the summer. They will be weighed at housing.



Patrick McCarthy Clonakilty College, Cork

The final grass measuring for the whole farm this season was carried out on 1 October. Grass growth was averaging 45kg DM/ha/day. Livestock demand was 33kg/ha which meant there was a surplus of grass building. Grazing days ahead of livestock on 1 October was 33 days. The stocking rate on the grazing platform is 2.34 LU/ha, or 1,537kg liveweight/ha.

The plan is to start weaning calves in the next fortnight and house the cows and yearling cattle. Weanlings will be held out until November to graze out paddocks.

Second cut silage was harvested three weeks later than planned on 19 August but good grass growth has helped to make up for the silage ground into the rotation late. Silage budgets have been carried out and we are fine for winter fodder. Spring cows

have been scanned and five out of 32 cows were not in-calf after a breeding period of 12 weeks. The heifers scanned well with 10 out of 10 in-calf to HCA through AI. The five empty cows will be separated for feeding before finishing.

Cows will be condition scored after housing and are presently in good body condition. Cows in BCS 3+ will be on a restricted silage diet with straw.

Weanlings were weighed in late August and averaged 238kg liveweight. They have gained 1.2kg/day from birth. The group is two thirds heifers and were born from late January to late April. Male calves were castrated in late August also.

Yearling cattle were weighed on 7 October and steers averaged 538kg liveweight. They have gained 0.73 kg/day since the last weighing in late June.

The bullocks and heifers for fattening will be offered 4kg/day of meal, plus silage, over winter. They will be finished in spring. Calves and yearlings have been treated for worms over summer and all cows and in-calf heifers have been given a salmonella vaccine.



Table 1: Liveweight gain of bulls in 2013

	Liveweight (kg)	DLWG (kg/day)	Cost per kg/DLWG
2 Feb (turnout)	231		
22 June	430	1.43	€0.23
24 July	473	1.34	€0.33
1 September (housing)	530	1.50	€0.95
21 October	630	1.96	€1.76

of ration would be consuming 6kg DM/day of grass. The daily cost of this diet is €1.42/day which is a cost per kg of liveweight gain of 95c.

COSTS

Overall, the bulls gained 299kg between turnout and housing at a total cost of €114/head. This gives an average cost of 38c/kg of liveweight gain for every bull grazed this year.

Assuming that the bulls have a killout of 60%, the bulls have gained 179kg of carcase over the season.

HOUSING

Once indoors, the bulls are built up to 11kg/day of a finishing ration (14% protein) which was purchased at €285/tonne. Silage (€23/t) is included in the diet at a rate of 10kg/head/day, plus 1kg of straw (€80/t).

The daily feeding cost in the final stages of finishing is €3.45/head. The bulls have gained 1.96kg/day from housing until 21 October and weighed 630kg on average. During this period, it cost €1.76 for every kg of liveweight gain.

Taking a beef price of €4.20/kg (including QA premium), a bull with a kill out of 58%

is generating €2.43, which is covering the cost of feeding. Fixed costs are not included in these calculations.

In 2012, carcase weights for bulls ranged from 380kg to 400kg. Donal is hoping to improve on this carcase weight, but he reckons that the bulls were 50kg lighter at housing in 2013 compared with 2012. The cattle have to be slaughtered by mid-November as the house is required for housing cows. Getting a high percentage of the animals' weight gain from grass means there is a short, high-cost finishing period required, giving a greater chance for the animals to leave a profit.

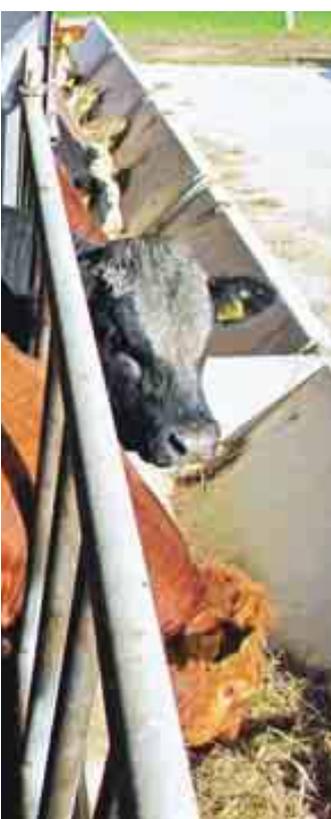
ADVISER COMMENT

Making sure that finishing cattle reach the target weights throughout the year are crucial, especially with bulls.

Housing bulls at lighter weights because of poor performance means they are housed on a high cost diet for longer. This will undermine profit.



Alan Dillon



ad-lib silage as they are usually in good body condition scores (BCS) of 3.5 to four.

With the higher quality silage this year, there will be a cost saving as the cows will not have to be supplemented with concentrates as in previous years.

Eliminating 2kg/cow/day will save 2.4 tonnes of concentrate in one month for Donal's herd.

Breeding started on 10 September, which is one week earlier than in 2012. The breeding period will run for 10 weeks and the target is to have 90% of the herd settled

in calf by housing which is planned for early November.

Once cows are settled in calf the meal will be cut from the diet, which will be four to five weeks after the breeding period.

BULL WEANINGS

Bulls have access to grass all winter through on/off grazing and receive 1.5kg/day of concentrates. They were turned out permanently from mid-March on and weaned by keeping the cow housed.

At this point, the bulls were eating 3kg/day of concentrates for three weeks before weaning.

From turnout, weanlings were on a grass-only diet until 1 August when meal was re-introduced at a rate of 1kg/day. The meal level was then built up to 6kg/day by the end of August at which point the bulls were housed for finishing.

Table 1 outlines the performance of the bulls since turnout in February and the cost per kg of liveweight gain. As the animals were on a grass-only diet until 1 August, they would have had an average grass intake of 6.5kg DM/day from turnout until 22 June.

At a standard grazing cost of 5c/kg DM, the daily grazing cost was €0.33/day, which translates into a cost per kg of liveweight gain of 23c.

For the period June to July, daily grazing costs were 45c/day, which is a cost per kg of liveweight gain of 33c.

From July to housing, approximately 120kg of concentrates (€280/t) were fed to each animal. Over a 30-day period, this works out at an average of 4kg concentrates per day.

A 500kg bull eating 4kg