

BETTERfarm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Spring grazing getting back on track



KIERAN MAILEY
LIVESTOCK SPECIALIST
kmailey@farmersjournal.ie

Spring weather has finally arrived across the country and the programme farms are playing catch-up on their spring fertilizer plans. Soil temperatures continue

to increase which is helping to stimulate grass growth. The southern farms have managed to increase the number of cattle going to grass over the past week.

Urea has been spread this week at a rate of 40 units/acre where no early fertilizer was previously applied.

There is always a risk of nitrogen loss from urea, but it is being spread during more overcast, or clouded periods of the day. There is still plenty of soil moisture and, combined with rising soil temperatures, grass is

responding to early nitrogen.

In the north of the country, the farms that operate on heavier ground have continued to spread slurry over bagged fertilizer to relieve storage pressure. While there has been less of an opportunity to get cattle out on the heavier farms, the programme advisers have said that ground conditions are improving and there will be a better opportunity to turn lighter cattle out next week.

First-calving heifers are being treated as a priority group on most farms and

they are also getting the chance to go back to grass, where ground conditions allow. These cattle have a higher energy requirement than mature cows to support lactation and body maintenance.

Spreading fertilizer at this stage can comfortably support grass growth of 20kg DM/ha from 1kg of nitrogen on most swards with ideal soil fertility. At a cost of €1.20/kg N (CAN at €320/t), a 400kg store animal will have a daily grazing demand of 8kg DM/ha.

By getting nitrogen out early onto productive swards, there will be the opportunity to carry 1,000kg of liveweight, or 2.5 store cattle at a grazing cost of approximately 45c to 50c/day. Given the lower feed costs and the improved performance from compensatory growth, the earlier the cattle can get back to grass the better.

Spring calving is still ongoing but is coming to a conclusion on a number of farms. With cows calving in good condition and the likelihood of getting back to good qual-

ity spring grass, there should be a boost in cow fertility after turnout helping to tighten calving spreads further.

Once settled at grass, concentrates will be withdrawn from the cow's diet as grass should be able to provide enough energy to support maintenance, lactation and breeding. Some of the farms are following the practice of getting later-calving cows out to grass before the early calving cows for the purpose of improving fertility and bringing them back into heat quicker.



ON THE GROUND

BILLY GLASHEEN

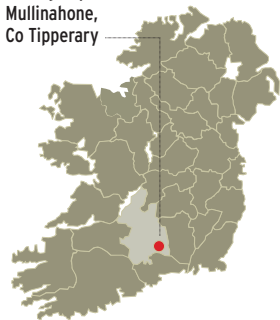
“From 2 October to 19 February, finishing cattle gained 1.1kg/day”

The BETTER Farm programme held the first of a series of regionalised farm walks on Tuesday of last week. The host farm for the event was Billy Glasheen, Co Tipperary. Billy operates a store-to-beef finishing system and is just one of two farmers in the programme who does not have suckler cows on the farm.

The event demonstrated the importance of getting maximum liveweight from cattle on a grass-based system. This included the value of an early turnout, grassland management throughout the season and improving silage quality. A crowd of approximately 400 people attended and were given an insight into the progress being made on the farm under the BETTER Farm programme.

Billy's farm consists of 43ha (106 acres), which is split into two blocks. The grazing platform consists of 31ha (76 acres) with the remaining 12ha (30 acres)

Ballingarry,
Mullinahone,
Co Tipperary



used to produce silage in a three-cut system. Depending on ground conditions and weather, the outfarm is also used for early and late-season grazing.

Cattle system

Billy and his local Teagasc adviser, Joe Hand, gave a comprehensive overview of the farm background, including the physical and financial performance. The cattle enterprise consists of purchasing dairy-bred steers from marts in the south east.

Billy does most of the buying himself and chooses to buy Angus or Hereford-

type steers as he considers continental animals to be too expensive to buy. Being located in a strong dairying region, it is easier to source dairy-bred stock.

Cattle are purchased at a target 400kg liveweight with an aim to slaughter them at 630kg liveweight. As one group of cattle is slaughtered, Billy replaces them with young stores. Last autumn, 96 cattle were bought at an average liveweight of 418kg at €859/head (€2.06/kg).

Purchase price plays a crucial role in the profitability of the system. Billy outlined to those in attendance that he will only buy cattle when their purchase price is in line with beef prices. With the current low beef prices and strong mart prices, he has delayed buying cattle this spring.

In 2012, the farm finished 156 steers at an average carcass weight of 320kg. In 2013, 109 steers were finished at 310kg, mainly due to reduced performance in the first half



of the year and a performance loss due to a rumen fluke problem.

There is a carryover of cattle that should have been slaughtered in late 2013.

They will now be slaughtered this year and will be reflected in the 2014 profit monitor with higher output values.

The plan for the farm is to move to finishing 250 cattle per annum and with assistance from programme adviser Alan Dillon, Billy is following a farm plan to achieve this.

Table 1 outlines the physical and financial performance on the farm over the past three years. The targets set for the farm to achieve by 2015 are also detailed. The gross margin has increased from €205/ha in 2011 to €707/ha.

Increased beef price is a leading factor in the increased gross margin as the cattle can be slaughtered through premium beef schemes.

Switching from ad-lib meal finishing to a short intensive feeding period has reduced the level of concentrates used during the finishing phase.

The focus has moved to making high quality silage to replace concentrates. Silage is 70 DMD and is supplemented with 5kg of meal during the finishing period. The finishing diet in winter 2012 was in excess of €4/day, which decreased to €2/day during last winter.

Cattle are weighed regularly on the farm. From 2 October to 19 February, finishing cattle gained 1.1kg/day with one group of Angus steers

gaining 1.3kg/day. Store cattle gained 0.6kg/day on a diet of ad-lib silage only. These cattle will be killed off grass in June. As part of the farm plan, around two thirds of the cattle will be slaughtered off grass in future.

Grassland

Billy has invested heavily in soil fertility in the past two years and it has been money well spent. With the farm plan increasing stocking rate to 2.5LU/ha or 250 cattle annually, Billy needs productive grassland to be able to graze these animals.

There is no point in trying to increase stock numbers if you cannot grow enough grass to feed them; otherwise, the need for concentrates is increased. Billy's farm produced 11.4 tonnes/ha in 2013, which at 18% dry



A TEAGASC/IRISH FARMERS JOURNAL INITIATIVE



WEEK IN REVIEW

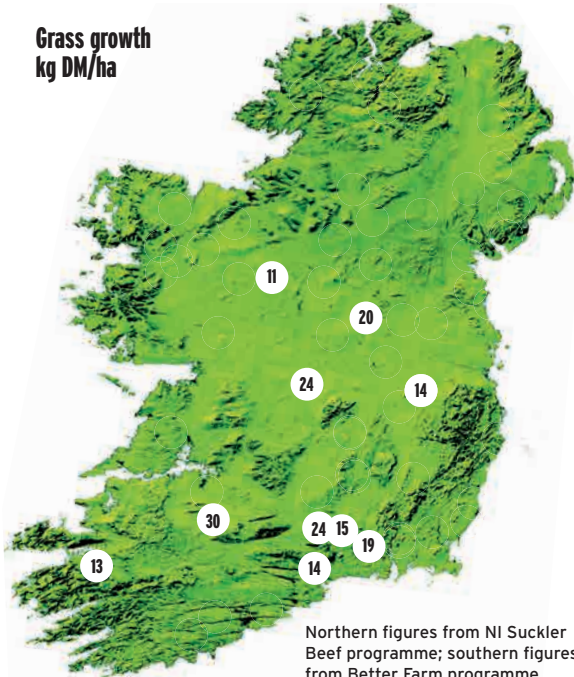
Improved weather has helped the more of the programme farmers to get up to date with slurry and fertilizer spreading. Where fertilizer is applied for the first time this year, some of the farms are applying up to 40 units to get grass growth back on track. The farms have taken the

opportunity to get more cattle out to grass over the past week with some of the heavier farms looking to get stock out next week. First-calved and later calving cows are getting the opportunity to go back to grass ahead of early calving mature cows to bring these animals back into heat quicker.

When storing colostrum for calves, many farmers opt to store it in plastic milk cartons which are slow to defrost. Using plastic resealable bags when freezing the milk makes it much easier to defrost the colostrum as they have a greater surface area compared with a milk carton.

TOP TIP

Grass growth kg DM/ha



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

FARMER FOCUS

Mike Dillane Co Kerry

I am currently waiting for land to dry out here in Kerry. With better weather this week, I have plans to turn out 12 to 15-month-old heifers on the driest paddocks on the farm. They will be slaughtered off grass in the summer. First calvers will also be turned to grass at the weekend, while any cows remaining inside will have their calves grazing around the shed.

Calving is just about finished here. I have two late-calving cows left. Roughly 80% of my cows were calved by the first week of January inside a 10-week calving spread. Anything calving in late January, February and March this year will be culled to further tighten up the calving spread.

I killed the first of my bulls under 16 months and they have performed extremely well in the last six weeks, averaging 1.7kg/head/day. They were eating



up to 10kg of ration along with 4kg to 5kg of silage and ad-lib access to straw. The first batch averaged 400kg carcass weight and all but one graded U. I plan to kill the rest over the next fortnight.

I viewed this as a trial run year and have learned a lot about the system. Once I do my sums on the margins, I will make a decision on whether to expand this operation and finish all stock or keep selling some as weanlings. I feel I am not being paid for the quality of stock I produce to sell at the weaning stage and 16-month-old bulls allow me to add value to my cattle.

On the grazing front, I have started measuring grass again. Slurry will be applied to all bare paddocks that the tanker can travel on at roughly 2,500 gallons per acre. Covers of up to 1,200kg DM/ha will receive one bag of urea per acre to drive growth, while heavier covers of up to 1,800kg DM/ha will be grazed and either receive slurry or 1.5 to two bags of 18-6-12 to improve P (phosphorus) and K (potassium) levels.

KEY POINTS

- ➔ Simplicity: Keeping things as simple as possible by buying the same cattle type and age and focusing on grass finishing rather than winter finishing.
- ➔ Volume: Keeping a good turnover of cattle to increase output.
- ➔ Flexibility: The system must be able to adapt to change.



Dairy-bred steers are purchased at a target liveweight of 400kg on Billy Glasheen's farm.

Figure 1 Change in P index for 2012 vs 2013

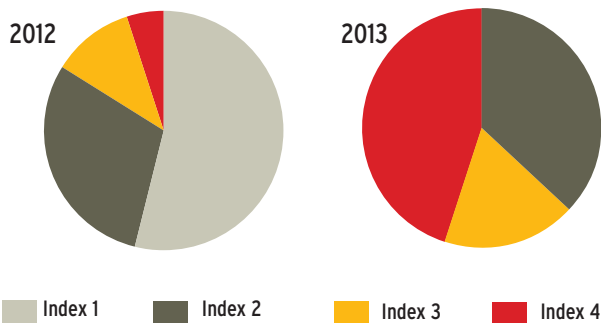


Figure 2 Change in K index for 2012 vs 2013

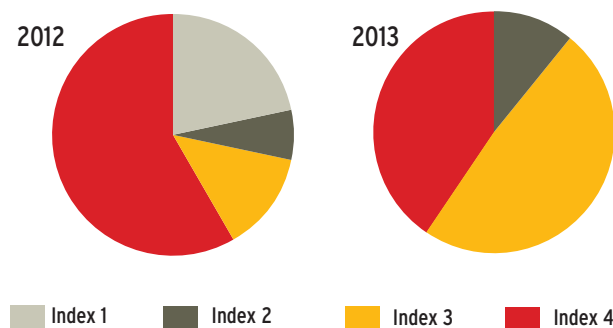


Table 1: Physical and financial performance on farm

	2011	2012	2013	2015 (est)
Stocking rate (LU/ha)	1.95	1.87	2.15	2.5
Total farm kg LW	29,725	28,372	29,858	47,190
Kg LW/ha	725	692	696	1,100
Gross output (€/ha)	883	1,707	2,034	2,431
Variable costs (€/ha)	678	1,105	1,327	1,331
Gross margin (€/ha)	205	602	707	1,100

Table 2: Spring rotation planner

Week ending	Weekly % of farm grazed	Grazing area per week (ha)	Total area grazed (ha)
8 March	13.3%	5.7	5.7
15 March	13.3%	5.7	11.4
22 March	13.3%	5.7	17.1
29 March	15%	6.43	23.53
5 April	15%	6.43	29.96
12 April	30%	12.87	43
100%			

matter is the equivalent of 25 tonnes per acre freshweight.

The farm used 156 units of nitrogen per acre in 2013, which is approximately six bags/acre of CAN. Taking nitrogen at €330/t, one unit of nitrogen will cost approximately 61c/kg, or €95/acre. The farm produced 696kg of liveweight per hectare (282kg liveweight/acre), which is an approximate cost of 33c/kg of liveweight gain from grass last year.

The farm is mostly using compound fertilizers to correct P and K levels, as well as lime. Fertilizer and lime costs have more than doubled from €176/ha to €360/ha in 2013. Figures 1 and 2 outline the changes in soil fertility with phosphorous (P) and potassium (K) indices for Billy's farm.

The farm has eliminated

any soils with an index 1 which, when combined with reseeded grass and pH 6+, increases grass growth. Raising pH also releases more nitrogen from organic matter within the soil. Moving from a pH of between 5.5 and 5.8 to between 6.0 and 6.3 can release an extra 60 to 80 units of nitrogen for grass growth, which is worth €60 to €80/ha.

Spring turnout

Billy has completed a spring rotation planner with the help of his farm advisers. The farm has approximately one third of cattle back at grass and the target is to start the second grazing rotation by 12 April. The outfarm is the main early grazing focus due to heavy grass covers building over the winter.

It is important that these covers are eaten off before the ground is closed up for silage. If it is not grazed off first, there will be an increased build-up of dead matter in the sward and, therefore, reduced silage quality. Table 2 outlines the spring rotation planner on the farm.

David Walsh Co Tipperary

I have tightened up my calving spread this year, with 84% of my cows calving in less than seven weeks. While doing so, I have also moved my calving date back by two weeks to start in the last week of January.

I felt the cows were calving too early, so I decided to move them to start calving closer to the beginning of the grazing season.

This week, I am getting fertilizer and slurry out onto the land.

Up to now, I have only managed to get out with slurry on dry paddocks to relieve pressure on slurry tanks.

I aim to spread a bag of urea on 60% of the ground that will not be receiving slurry. There are approximately 20 acres of heavy grass covers on land that was reseeded and sub-soiled last year. Ground conditions are still soft on these fields due to reseeded, but will be targeted for early grazing with light, dairy-bred



Limousin replacement heifers once ground allows. I spread 18-6-12 on this ground at two bags per acre to increase P and K levels.

The farm will be carrying a much higher stocking rate this year, so I need to get out with nitrogen early.

Once light weanlings are out, I plan to turn out first calvers to grass next.

The boost in nutrition from early grass should lead to earlier cycling. All in all, despite the wet start to the year, I should still have all sheds emptied by 1 April.

My stocking rate will increase to approximately 2.2 LU/ha. When I joined the programme, the farm was stocked at less than 1.3LU/ha. This will test the grassland management skills that I have learned over the past 18 months and will hopefully drive up output on the farm.

Along with increasing cow numbers to nearly 50, I am planning to keep all yearling stock until late autumn. The heifers will be slaughtered off grass while steers will be sold as forward stores.