

# BETTER farm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

## Maintain performance by avoiding health issues



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With favourable conditions for high levels of animal performance, there has been less pressure on the immune system of all animals.

The focus on programme farms in the next two months is to ensure preventable

health issues do not compromise optimum animal performance.

One of the main risk periods approaching is the health of cows and calves pre- and post-weaning and freshly calving autumn cows.

A second worm treatment in spring-born calves is currently being administered on many farms with faecal egg counts being collected and analysed to assess the need for treatment on others.

The use of faecal egg counts to identify the need for worm treatment has increased in frequency. This is following samples collected post-housing in 2013 which

showed a high percentage of animals did not require routine treatment for liver fluke, rumen fluke or worms.

The results of samples submitted are generally being returned in less than a week.

Products used vary between farms with advice from veterinary surgeons recommending alternating between products with a different active ingredient.

In all cases, treatment is being administered at least two weeks before weaning.

Some farmers are administering vaccinations for pneumonia and IBR in calves approaching weaning, but in general the approach taken is

to minimise issues by avoiding weaning-related stress.

Gradual weaning is the preferred method on most farms. This is being carried out by weakening the bond between cows and calves by allowing calves to creep graze ahead of cows.

Introducing meal feeding in the run-up to weaning also serves to keep animals more content.

The weaning process differs between farms. Some are locking calves that are accustomed to creep grazing in paddocks away from their cows but still in sight.

Others will remove a few cows gradually from the

group over the space of the week, which also serves to reduce grass demand as the grazing season progresses.

More farmers favour abrupt weaning, due to farm circumstances, by removing all cows and housing for a few days, while leaving animals in the paddocks they are settled grazing in.

Farmers who are selling weanlings favour weaning at least three to four weeks pre-sale date to allow weanlings sufficient time to overcome weaning and look their best for sale.

The recent rainfall has increased the quality of grass swards. With night-

time temperatures likely to dip in the coming weeks and high-quality, rapidly digestible grass available, farmers are starting to introduce magnesium supplementation to high-risk cows to prevent grass tetany.

The highest risk cows are freshly calved cows and cows suckling strong calves and grazing lush grass.

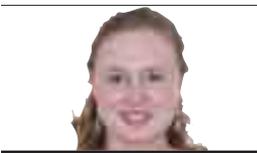
Some farms are also administering a vaccination programme in autumn calvers including BVD, Leptospirosis and neosporosis for optimum breeding performance and the main scour causes by rotavirus, coronavirus, E.coli and Salmonella.



## ON THE GROUND

FRANK AND DES BEIRNE

“A major part of the reseeding programme is being able to pinpoint paddocks that are not performing”



**CATHERINE EGAN**  
PROGRAMME ADVISER

The importance of increasing output from grass is a key component of the BETTER farm programme. Maximising the proportion of quality grazed grass in the animal's diet has increased liveweight output across the farms.

Improving utilisation, through a combination of early turnout, prolonging the grazing season, implementing a paddock system and rotational grazing has facilitated the increase in stocking rate and overall output.

Continual soil sampling and targeting slurry and compound fertilizers to low index soils has increased

the performance of these paddocks. However, it is only capable of bringing swards so far, with growing more grass and sustaining a higher stocking rate presenting challenges.

To overcome this, all farms in the BETTER farm programme have undertaken a reseeding programme. A major part of the reseeding programme is being able to pinpoint paddocks that are not performing, through grass measuring, and target those for reseeding.

### Farm details

Frank and Des Beirne farm 80ha, of which 36ha is rented, in Newtownforbes, Co Longford.

The farm carries 98 cows, split 60/40 between spring (January to end of March) and autumn (July to end of September) calving.

Cows are bred to two Charolais stock bulls – a terminal or maternal sire. A Limousin bull has also been

purchased this year to breed with replacement heifers.

The most productive and fertile cows are selected to breed maternal herd replacements. This year, a number of five-star rated heifers were also purchased at a special breeding sale.

Heifers that are not selected for breeding are housed for the winter and sold the following spring as stores or beef. All bulls are kept at grass until a target live-weight of 520kg is achieved and then finished indoors.

### Progress made

In 2013, the farm produced almost 10.1t grass DM/ha, despite the challenges of the weather.

While reseeding was not carried out for 12 years (ploughing and tilling to level lands that needed attention), grassland management was relatively good and has been boosted since joining the programme by improving utilisation through intro-



ducing more paddocks and implementing a reseeding programme.

Areas for reseeding are identified by walking the farm weekly and recording grass measurements (in centimetres).

Since joining the BETTER farm programme, output on the farm has increased from 506kg/ha in 2010 to 781kg/ha in 2013.

Without a doubt, new swards have been invaluable to carry the increased stocking rate. So far, approximately 15% to 20% of swards have been targeted annually to be reseeded, although this varied between years depending

on the weather, finances and demand for grass.

Before reseeding, Frank and Des ask themselves a number of important questions to best plan their reseeding, as outlined below.

### Why are we reseeding?

Originally, the main answer would have been old and less productive grass in the sward. However, like many farms, poor weather conditions in 2012 led to poaching of paddocks with decisions in 2013 taken to repair damaged swards.

Since then, paddocks are being selected based on their performance compared to

surrounding paddocks.

If similar surrounding paddocks are producing 3t to 4t DM/ha more, this is questioned and if there are no other underlying factors (for example, soil fertility), these areas are targeted for reseeding.

### What sort of sward is wanted?

The type of sward and grass variety selected depends on whether its primary use is for grazing or silage and if the sward is required for early or late grazing.

Initially, Des and Frank would have drawn from local experience of neighbouring



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WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Scanning of spring calvers is commencing (pregnancy can be identified 35 days post-conception).
- ➔ Strong bull and heifer calves are being separated and grazed separately.
- ➔ Farms tight on grass are spreading 20 to 25 units nitrogen post-grazing.
- ➔ Cattle within 50kg to 60kg of finishing are being segregated for meal feeding to advance the slaughter date.

➔ Take a detailed look at cow performance. Animals with poor breeding performance or consistently underperforming and producing lesser-quality weanlings should be earmarked for culling.

TOP TIP

Grass growth kg DM/ha



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

FARMER FOCUS

Cathal Crean Co Wexford

The rain that fell over the last two weeks was more than welcome. My land is heavy in nature and although it didn't suffer from the drought to the same extent as other farms in my region, the rain will help to boost grass growth and improve quality.

I cut my second cut silage on 17 July and I was very happy with the yield and quality. We got showers of rain shortly after it and I dressed all the grazing ground with 25 units of nitrogen and spread a bag per acre of 10:10:20 on fields with low P and K index soils.

As weather was so dry and ground conditions were ideal for field work, I spread farmyard manure on some grazing ground and followed it up two weeks later with 2t/ac of ground limestone.

I reseeded a three acre paddock in May and sprayed it with a post-emergence herbicide in June. The sward is doing very well. I plan on sowing more grass seed in a six acre



paddock when the barley is cut off it.

My calves have been dosed for worms twice so far this grazing season using an ivermectin-based product on both occasions. I will start creep grazing the calves in the next few days to allow access to fresh, lush grass and let the cows clean out the paddocks better.

I housed half of my spring 2013 bulls for finishing in mid-July. They weighed 530kg on 9 July, gaining 1.25kg/day at grass. I fed them for two weeks before housing and built them up to 6kg.

They are now on ad-lib concentrates and straw. The ration is made up of 70% of my own rolled barley, 20% soya hulls and 10% soyabean meal and minerals.

They are housed on slats with a straw bedded lie-back area. The remaining bulls are still at grass and will be housed in the next two to three weeks for finishing. I will also feed them concentrates at grass before housing.

Weather permitting, I hope to start harvesting my spring barley this weekend.



Autumn calvers this week grazing a paddock that was reseeded two years ago. Frank and Des Beirne aim for grass seed varieties with good spring and autumn growth.

two to three bags of 10:10:20 was spread. Three bags of granulated lime were also spread to neutralise the soil.

Following this, paddocks were rolled to ensure good soil-to-seed contact.

Every field and farm situation is different, so there is no one-size-fits-all in terms of methods of reseeding. This method works on the Beirne farm as the land is level, free-draining and it is a matter of renewing the sward.

Ploughing is avoided as stones and roots of trees are an issue. Minimum cultivation also avoids ploughing down fertile soil and brings the paddock back into the system faster (can be grazed sooner as soil is not disturbed greatly).

Minimum cultivation is also being practiced by other programme farmers with good results.

Mixtures

The main objective in selecting grass seed varieties on the Beirne farm is to combine grasses of differing traits to obtain good overall dry matter (DM) production with a focus especially on selecting seed varieties with strong performance in spring/autumn periods.

The seed mixtures used (Table 1) have performed well, spread at 1.25bags/acre. The second mixture heads out two to three days earlier than preferred and it is more difficult to graze tight.

Table 1:

Mix 1	Kg	Mix 2	Kg
Dephin	4	Tyrella	4
Portstewart	4	Twymax	4
Mesquita	4	Trystar	4



A paddock system allows small areas to be removed from the grazing rotation and reseeded.

This paddock needed to be topped this year, while mixture one was grazed as tight and did not need to be topped, despite both receiving the same management.

Interestingly, as grass measuring was carried out on both paddocks, they both produced the same amount of grass DM/ha last year.

Learning from experience

A seven acre paddock that was damaged in 2012 during poor weather conditions was reseeded this year.

The areas of poaching at the top and bottom of the paddock were disced and a power harrow was used to level this area.

The centre of the field was fine and minimum cultivation was carried out on the whole paddock afterwards. Last year this paddock only produced 2.5 t DM/Ha. To date this paddock has produced 8t DM/Ha. The benefit of reseeding is clearly evident in this paddock.

Post-reseeding management

Finally, a step often forgotten is the post-emergence herbi-

cide, which should be applied from five to eight weeks post-establishment.

The correct chemical should be used to target the weeds starting to take hold.

Des and Frank said that following reseeding the job is not complete. Correct management (tight grazing, avoid poaching, sufficient nutrients) of the sward in the following years is critical to fully reap the benefits of reseeding.

Conclusion

Reseeding is expensive but it is definitely one of the most cost-effective on-farm investments. New ryegrass varieties have a higher sugar content, which leads to enhanced animal performance and improved ensilability in comparison to old swards. Perennial ryegrass swards are 25% more responsive to nitrogen compared with old permanent pasture. Additionally, they have faster regrowth and support higher stocking rates.

Marty Lenehan Co Sligo

Autumn calving is under way and, so far, I have seven cows calved. There are 52 cows in the autumn herd and they will finish calving in mid-October.

The mature cows are calving to a Charolais and Simmental stock bull and the two-year-old heifers are calving to an easy-calving Limousin bull.

So far, calving is going well. I have had cows tightened up since weaning and even with this, they are in good condition with the grass growth we've had.

I have brought cows that are due to calve in the next six weeks back to the yard from an outfarm. I have done this for two reasons - greater supervision and also to restrict intake.

Cows are grazing a bare paddock beside the shed and I am also giving them access to silage in the shed to encourage them to walk in and out, which I hope



will have them fitter for calving.

I should have plenty of fodder from the first cut and second cut. Second cut was made last week. I was very pleased with the heavy quality crop it yielded. It has been an excellent year for grass growth and numerous surplus paddocks have been taken out.

Last year's autumn bull weanlings will be sold at the end of August. Weanlings have done well and I estimate they are about 480kg on average. I hope to weigh next week to get an accurate weight.

They are on good-quality grass and have been eating 2kg of ration since early July. The autumn-born heifers will be sold in September.

Spring-born cows and calves are grazing good-quality grass at the moment. They will be faecal sampled soon and dosed accordingly.

I have selected a number of cows for culling as I have a number of extra replacements retained.

The culls are a mixture of old and problem cows. Three were weaned early and have been sent to the factory. The rest are receiving 3kg to 4kg meal and will be weaned in the coming weeks and sold live in the next month.