

BETTER farm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Autumn calving progressing well



KIERAN MAILEY
LIVESTOCK SPECIALIST
kmailey@farmersjournal.ie

The favourable weather conditions that were experienced across the country last autumn and early winter meant cows were in good body condition going into the breeding season.

It also meant that with plentiful grass supplies, cows were quick to come back in heat and conception rates to first and second service were initially high, according to scanning results.

This has carried through into autumn calving on the programme farms this month. Farmers and advisers are reporting that autumn calving is progressing relatively trouble-free, with some herds having over 50% of cows calved down in the first few weeks of the calving period.

Autumn cows are being

calved outdoors on paddocks adjoining the main farmyard where they can be closely supervised or housed a few days prior to the predicted calving date and turned out scanning results.

“While calves may not be showing visual signs of worming, there is a large enough presence in dung samples to merit treatment ahead of the weaning period

within hours of calving.

This has greatly reduced the risk of disease, which inevitably reduces calf mortality. In most instances, the programme farmers are offering hay or rough grazing/forage and minerals pre-calving to dry cows.

After calving, cows are being moved to high-quality grass that has been saved specifically for autumn cows. Some of this saved ground is silage aftermath that has now joined the grazing rotation.

Due to the grass quality, most cows are not being sup-

plemented with meals after calving.

With herds already having good numbers of cows calved, this is making it easier to batch cows for grazing as bigger group numbers are easier managed in paddocks and to match grass supplies to.

Worming

Spring calves are being wormed and receiving the first shot of pneumonia vaccine. Faecal egg counts are being taken in some cases to determine the worm burden before any product is used.

While calves may not be showing visual signs of a worm burden, there is a large enough presence in dung samples to merit treatment ahead of the weaning period next month.

After a prolonged dry spell in July and frequent rainfall in August, there is a risk of lung worms becoming a problem in calves as the rainfall will cause worm populations to hatch and multiply rapidly.

Lungworms were a problem for some of the programme farms last year and the emphasis is firmly on prevention this autumn.



ON THE GROUND TOMÁS MURPHY

“Increase rotation length from 25 days in August to 35 to 40 days in late September”



PETER LAWRENCE
PROGRAMME ADVISER

We are now entering a very important period of the grass growing season whereby the objectives are to start building a grass bank on the farm to prolong the grazing season and to plan on setting up the farm for early turnout of stock to grass next spring.

One of the main objectives of the BETTER farm programme is to increase the amount of grazed grass in the animal's lifetime diet to reduce production costs and optimise animal performance.

Therefore, focusing on prolonging the grazing season plays a key role as every

extra tonne of grass utilised is worth €90/ha.

When building an autumn grass wedge, the target is to extend the rotation length from 25 to 30 days in mid- to late August up to 35 to 40 days in late September.

Most farms should be planning to apply their last dressing of fertilizer and rates will vary from 20 to 40 units, depending on stocking rate and current average farm cover (days of grass ahead).

Pre-grazing covers of 2,000kg to 2,300kg DM/ha (11cm to 13cm) in mid-September will help slow down the rotation. It is not advisable to graze covers above 2,500kg DM/ha (>13cm) as they are difficult to graze out and utilisation is poor. Ideally, they should be harvested as surplus baled silage in August.

Removing surplus paddocks in mid-September should be avoided as growth rates are generally too low to allow the paddock to be in-

cluded in the last rotation.

The aim is to have an average farm cover of 1,000kg DM/ha (7cm to 8cm) by late September. Table 1 outlines the target pasture farm covers during the autumn period.

Tomás Murphy farms a mixed beef and sheep farm on 68 adjusted hectares of grassland in Durrow, Co Laois. The farm is fragmented and the grazing land is divided into four separate blocks within a two-mile radius of the main farm.

Traditionally, Tomás was calving 25 cows from late August to October and 40 cows from January to March and had an early (January) and a mid-season (March) lambing flock of ewes.

Tomás has moved away from autumn calving and has now established a 70-cow spring herd calving in an eight- to 10-week period between January and March.

The early lambing ewe enterprise has now joined

the mid-season lambing flock. The main reasons for these changes were to reduce labour and production costs by means of simplifying grassland management to help have a longer grazing season.

Having less competition for grazed grass during both shoulders of the grazing season (spring and autumn) when grass growth is relatively low has made grass budgeting during these important periods easier.

Tomás has installed extra paddocks on his farm and has seen the benefits of being able to carry more stock on the same land area and ultimately grow more grass.

The farm is free-draining and has good potential for early turn-out in the spring. It is important for Tomás to have sufficient grass available for grazing in late February/early March to help free up housing space during spring when cows start calving and reduce winter feed



Adviser tips:

- ➔ Walk farm and assess/quantify average farm cover or days grazing ahead.
- ➔ Increase rotation length from 25 to 30 days in mid-August to 35 to 40 days in late September.
- ➔ Apply fertilizer to help build grass wedge.
- ➔ Do a 60/40 autumn rotation planner for your farm.
- ➔ Start closing from 1 to 10 October, depending on soil type.
- ➔ Do not re-graze these swards until next spring.
- ➔ Pre-grazing yields should not exceed 2,000kg to 2,300kg DM/ha (11cm to 13cm).
- ➔ Try graze paddocks down to 4cm in final rotation with lighter stock to encourage winter tillering.
- ➔ Aim to have a closing farm cover of 500kg to 600kg DM/ha at housing.

requirements.

As can be seen from Figure 1, grass growth on Tomás's farm was excellent during May and June, but plummeted in early July due to a lack of rainfall and picked up again after a bag per acre of CAN with sulphur (Super Net) was blanket-spread during some light showers in mid-July.

Grass growth dropped off again in late July/early August mainly due to a soil moisture deficit and the plant having gone to seed due to moisture stress. However, growth seems to be recovering as Tomás measured 50kg and 62kg DM/ha/day over the last two weeks.

Tomás carried a relatively high stocking rate (~3.59 LU/ha or ~2,393kg LW/ha) with a demand of 48kg DM/ha/day on his grazing block on the main farm during most of the grazing season with one group of suckler cows and calves and another grazing group of beef heifers.



A TEAGASC/IRISH FARMERS JOURNAL INITIATIVE

In association with



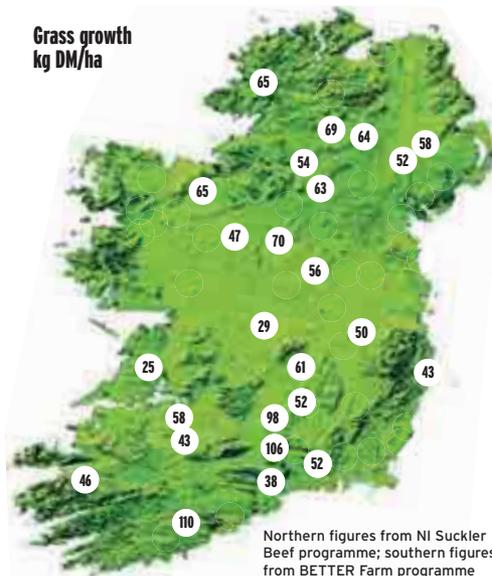
WEEK IN REVIEW

- Autumn calving is progressing smoothly for the programme farms with some farms being able to calve out-doors, while on others, cows are being housed for a short time period and returned to bare pasture post calving.
- Good weather during the breeding season last year has led to high numbers of cows calving in the first cycle.
- Silage aftermath and good quality grass swards have been saved for grazing calved autumn cows to reduce the requirement for meal supplementation.
- Cows are mainly getting minerals through lick buckets to prevent problems such as Tetany.
- Calves are being wormed and vaccinated ahead of the high stress weaning period next month.

Calculate silage stocks in store to see if you have sufficient fodder in store for this coming winter. An online fodder calculator can be viewed for free at the following web address: www.farmersjournal.ie/toolbox/fodder

TOP TIP

Grass growth kg DM/ha



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

FARMER FOCUS

Chris McCarthy Co Westmeath

Rainfall early in the week was very welcome here in Crookedwood. Grass growth this week is 56kg DM/ha and grass is growing well at this stage in the grazing season.

I am currently spreading one bag of CAN fertilizer per acre after each grazing to lengthen my rotation. I cut my second-cut silage two weeks ago. I was very happy with the high yield and I am confident that I will have plenty of fodder to last the winter.

I intend to keep grass in the diet for as long as possible this autumn and as such will continue to try to lengthen the grazing rotation while grass growth is strong.

The spring-born calves are grazing good-quality grass and thriving well. They are creep grazing under the wire in front of the cows.

I plan to weigh them again in the first week of

September. I will use this to also give them their second worm dose. They were last weighed on 10 July and the bulls were gaining 1.28kg/day from birth and heifers were achieving 1.12kg/day from birth. I intend to wean these calves from the middle of September.

I scanned the cows on 30 July, which was 40 days after removing the bulls. Out of 54 cows, 50 proved in-calf. I was very pleased with the scan.

One of the four cows that proved empty had been repeating all year so I was not expecting her to be in-calf. Three of the other cows that scanned empty were identified as having a follicular cyst.

If I had carried out a mid-season scan, these three cows may have been identified then. It is definitely something I will consider doing next year. There are three other cows that were not presented for breeding and will be culled this year due to old age and poor performance.



Table 1: Target pasture herbage mass (farm cover) for herd stocked at 2.5 LU/ha on grazing area*

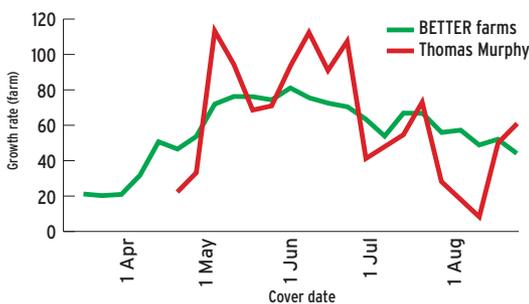
Date	Stocking rate on grazing area (LU/ha)	Growth rate (kg DM/ha/day)	Target average farm cover (kg DM/ha)	Target cover per LU (Kg DM/LU)	Event
Aug 15	2.5	65.0	848	342	
Sept 15	2.5	37.1	1130	450	Peak cover achieved
Oct 15	2.5	26.8	1050	424	First paddock closed
Nov 15	2.5	8.5	650	262	
Nov 30	2.5	2.7	560	224	Stock housed

*These figures will have to be adjusted if the farm is not stocked at 2.5 LU/ha. For a farm stocked at 1.5 LU/ha reduce by 25%. Source: Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal Grazing Guide

Table 2: Autumn grazing planner showing weekly targets for Tomás Murphy

Week	Grazing area (Ha) per week	Actual area grazed week-end (total)
10-17 Oct	3.5	3.5
17-24 Oct	3.5	7
24-31 Oct	3.5	10.5
31 Oct-7 Nov	3.5	14
7-14 Nov	2	16
14-21 Nov	2	18
21-28 Nov	2	20

Figure 1 Distribution of grass growth for Thomas Murphy and BETTER farm participants in 2014



As growth rates reduced over the last month, so did his average farm cover as demand was greater than what he grew in recent weeks.

Farm cover is now below target at 500kg DM/ha but has improved to 646kg DM/ha from his farm measure this week due to improved growth rates. The target farm cover at this time of year is between 800kg and 900kg DM/ha.

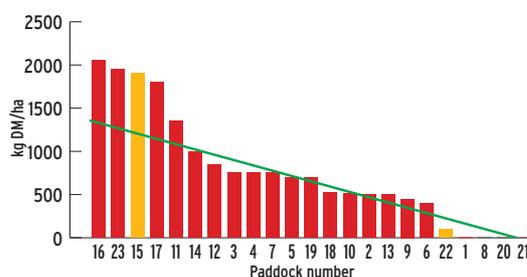
However, as can be seen from Tomás's farm wedge in Figure 2, there may be a slight deficit in supply of grass coming in the weeks as he will plan to graze heavier covers. The yellow bars in

the chart represent stock groups grazing and the red bars represent the yield of grass (kg DM/ha) in each paddock available to graze ranking them from the highest yielding to the lowest yielding.

With the recent rain that fell, coupled with the 25 to 30 units of nitrogen that Tomás will spread, this should be able to help build grass supply.

Tomás may also have to reduce his stocking rate on this block of land by moving cows and calves to another block or wean some cows with older calves to reduce demand.

Figure 2 Thomas Murphy's grass wedge



60/40 autumn rotation

Once Tomás has established his farm cover to the target 1,000kg DM/ha in late September, his main objective is to prolong grazing using the 60/40 autumn rotation planner to ensure paddocks are correctly set up for grazing next spring.

The principle of the 60/40 planner is based on having proportions of the farm closed by certain dates (working to a plan). On dry farms like Tomás's, he will start closing paddocks on 10 October and aim to have 60% of the farm grazed by the first week of November and

the remaining 40% by mid-November/early December.

In essence, this means housing priority animals first (e.g. finishing cattle) and maintain the other animals at grass for the remaining 40%. Farms on heavier and later-growing soils should start closing on 1 October and aim to have 60% of their farm grazed by 20 October and the remaining 40% by early to mid-November. Tomás will plan to close his driest and most sheltered paddocks first so that they will be the first to graze next spring. See Table 2 for Tomás Murphy's 60/40 autumn rotation planner based on 20ha.

Heinz Eggert Co Kildare

The dry weather this summer has suited farms with heavy soils as our grass growth did not suffer from a lack of soil moisture in recent weeks.

Grass utilisation has been excellent and my swards are consistently grazed down to 4cm due to good ground conditions.

I sold my 2013 spring bulls in late June through a live exporter to Italy. They averaged 500kg and I was happy with the price. I also sold my beef heifers live two weeks ago at 468kg to a finisher.

As a result, my stocking rate has reduced to 1.97 LU/ha (1,485kg LW/ha) and my grass demand is currently at 30kg DM/ha/day. Growth has been running around 50kg DM/ha/day nearly all summer.

I will be in a good position to build grass for the back-end. I am applying my last round of fertilizer after each grazing. Low P and K index soils are getting 1.5 bags/acre of 18:6:12 with sulphur, and soils that are index 3 and 4 are getting approximately a bag per acre of Sulpha CAN.

My second-cut silage was cut at the end of July. It re-

ceived 1,000 gallons of slurry and two bags/acre of 18:6:12. It should be ready for grazing again in the next seven to 10 days.

I removed my stock bulls from the cows on 3 July and separated bull calves from heifer calves to form two grazing groups. I plan on giving them a worm dose next week and I will weigh them to monitor their performance.

I have also started to let the calves creep graze ahead of the cows to ensure that the cows are cleaning out the paddocks, while not restricting the calf access to grass.

This year, I have put a lot of emphasis on monitoring cashflow on the farm using the Teagasc cost-control planner. I find it very useful to review what my production costs are compared with what I budgeted at the start of the year.

