Grazing land now closing

ON THE GROUND
MIKE POWLEY

Bulls are slaughtered at 400 days of age and carcase weights usually reach 415kg

FARM FACTS
- 120ha (300 acres) rented farm.
- 40ha (120 acres) arable land.
- 48ha (120 acres) spring-calving suckler herd.
- 100% AI breeding.
- 100% Saleforce sired.
- 130 units nitrogen applied per year.

The father and son team of Tom and Mike Powley run 100 spring-calving suckler cows on 180 acres of rented grassland.

Grazing ground has started to be closed up this week on the BETTER farms. Although heavy rainfall early last week made ground conditions difficult in the north and west of the country, drier weather towards the weekend made it possible to get paddocks grazed tight before closing.

The programme farms are following the autumn rotation planner to close up land. The target is to now have 60% of the farm grazed out over the next three weeks. The final part of the farm will be grazed out with young weanlings through on/off grazing. On drier land, some cows will remain at grass as long as weather permits.

Bulls destined for slaughter under 16 months of age have now been housed on the majority of farms. With housing weights of 400kg in early spring born calves and 500kg to 550kg in autumn-born bulls, these animals will have a shorter intensive feeding period.

The farms that possess their own weigh scales have typically seen spring-born bulls averaged 1.7kg/day over a 15-day feeding period in animals with a high genetic merit. This is adding an additional 25kg of liveweight to bulls.

Young bulls will tend to have a higher killout than grass-fed 18- to 20-month-old bulls. At 60% killout, this brings carcase weight to 390kg.

Steers that are also going to be finished out of the shed have also been housed. The programme farmers have commented on how far ahead steers are compared to last year in terms of liveweight. Housing weights of 570kg to 590kg in spring-born animals will see them reach slaughter weights of 400kg by January.

Finishing cattle
Finishing cattle are being offered high-dry-matter and high-DMD silage bales that were saved from paddocks where grass was starting to get too strong during June and July. The advantage of these bales is that they are easier to manage than pit silage when only part of the herd is housed.

With finishing cattle on 4kg to 8kg of meal, they are consuming small quantities of silage daily (12kg to 18kg). This makes it difficult to manage the face of a clamp pit as feed-out rate is slow. Once cows are housed and silage demand increases, the pit can be opened as there is less chance of spoilage at the pit face.

The cows are calving down at 600kg to 620kg in most years and very seldom does a heifer require culling because she cannot rear a calf or go back in-calf.

The mature cows are served with Limousin and Blue sires, again to AI. The main herd sires used are Ronick Hawk, Carmorn Daphne, Tamhorn Warrior and Bluegrass Cyclone. All bulls are selected on estimated breeding values (EBVs) for growth, milk and calving ease.

As cows are at grass and the farm is fragmented, Mike uses a heat detection system that was partly funded by industry stakeholders.

In return for the investment, his farm is used as a demo farm for educational purposes. Cows wear collars with an individual microchip that records movement. The information is transmitted to a central computer unit in the centre of the field.

This unit has a range of 500m and costs £9,000 ($11,538) to supply and install. The collars cost £80 (€101) each, but have lasted five years without repair.

According to Mike, his cattle are gaining 1kg/day of carcase, currently worth £3.80/kg (€5.11 including VAT), so for every cycle a cow misses, he is losing out on £80, which covers the cost of the collar. Across the whole herd, the cost of the unit would be recovered in...
WEEK IN REVIEW

- Grazing ground has now been closed up for spring turnout on the programme farms.
- Improved weather over the weekend and early this week has helped to clean covers out tight before closing.
- The target is to have 60% of the farm grazed and closed in the next three weeks.
- Finishing cattle are now housed and started on their finishing diet.
- High-DMD baled silage is being fed to finishing cattle.

If offering silage to cows outside, budget for one 850kg round bale to feed 15 cows per day. If there is still grass available to graze, one bale should be lasting close to two days. Where possible, feed on hardcore areas to prevent damage.

Winter feeding

Cows are housed and fed a mix of baled silage and urea-treated straw. Straw costs £20/t (£25/t for treatment (£32).

The urea increases the protein level of straw and, with cows being housed in body condition score four, they can have their diet restricted.

Cows weigh 780kg to 850kg liveweight, which can increase winter feed costs greatly. Cows are fed ad-lib straw and one bale of silage between 45 cows daily with minerals also offered.

Calves are weaned by late October in the field using electric wire. They are then housed two weeks later when they are treated for fluke, lice, worms and clipped.

Bulls weigh 350kg to 400kg at housing and Mike has his own weighing scale to monitor performance. They have been offered a mix of 90% barley and 10% soya in a creep feeder since 1 September.

Once housed in November, bulls are pushed for slaughter. They are fed 8kg/head of ration containing 90% barley, 5% soya and 5% regumix, which is a liquid protein combined with molasses. Barley is also treated with a urea-based product once harvested to increase crude protein levels to 17% to 18%. The treated grain helps to buffer the rumen in finishing diets of 90% barley.

Treated barley costs £120/t, soya costs £90/t and regumix costs £200/t, making the finishing ration costs approximately £136/t (£174).

Red clover silage is also offered, with digestibility of 72 to 76 DMD.

Before red clover was fed to finishing bulls, they ate 10kg to 11kg of ration per day. Bulls will consume 1.2t of meal during the finishing period.

Bulls are slaughtered at 400 days of age and carcase weights usually reach 415kg with 90% E and U+ grading animals and bulls reaching fat class 3. Kill-out for bulls ranges from 62% to 65% annually.

Cattle gain 1kg to 1.1kg of carcase weight per day, which is currently worth £3.80/kg (£4.11/kg including VAT) with approximate daily feed costs of £1.10/kg (£1.66/day). These costs exclude land rental and fixed costs.

Grassland

In Britain, there is little emphasis placed on the value of grassland management. Mike Powley has recognised how important good grassland is in terms of keeping animal performance high and costs low.

Approximately 10% of the main 84-acre grazing block is reseeded annually. Autumn is the preferred time to reseed and land is ploughed, harrowed and seed is sown using an air drill.

Soil fertility is good on the farm with lime applied regularly. Soil pH was low less than two years with improved conception rates. Once cows are confirmed in heat, they are calmly brought into a handling unit for inseminating, using electric wire. Conception rates to first service for the herd range from 70% to 80%.

Efforts are being made to have the whole herd calved within nine weeks. The herd currently calves in 12 weeks from March to early June. Blood profiles have shown cows are low in iodine and selenium, so all cows receive a bolus before the grazing season starts.

Percentage of farm closed for grazing until spring

Northern figures from NI Suckler Beef programme; southern figures from BETTER farm programme.

This 12-year-old South Devon X Limousin cow has produced 11 calves and is in-calf again.

Cows are bred to AI using Blue and Limousin sires. Cows wear a collar to aid heat detection. Calves are weaned at a minimum of 300kg liveweight in November at 200 days of age.

The heat detection unit is located on an outfarm and powered by a solar panel. The complete system cost £9,000 to supply and install and has been used for five years.

Mike Powley outlines how heat detection works on farm. The collar monitor cow movement and transmit the data every day to a central unit where he can check to see which animals are in heat.