

BETTERfarm

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

# Good grazing helps with cattle performance



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Across the majority of the programme farms, grass quality remains good for the time of year. On the farms with autumn calving cows, this is helping

to eliminate the requirement of concentrate feeding.

First calved heifers, and any cow with twins, are the only breeding animals that are receiving concentrate supplementation after calving.

Concentrates are being fed at a rate of 1kg to 2kg/day, depending on body condition and grass quality. In general, the programme advisers have commented that cow body condition is good across all the farms.

Last year's autumn-born weanlings are now starting to be marketed for sale.

Weanlings are being sold through the marts, as well as directly to feed lots. On some farms, the average liveweight is back as much as 10-40kg on last year. For others, weanling performance is still comparable with last year's sale weights.

Where weanlings have been eating concentrates, liveweight gains have increased on the farms and

range from 1.4kg/day to 1.7kg/day of liveweight gain since weaning.

Where weanlings are being sold, they have been weaned well in advance of sale. The main advantages of this are that the calf has less stress placed on it and there is less risk of pneumonia for the buyer.

On the farms that are selling directly to feed lots,

weanlings are being sold to repeat customers, often at higher prices, as the animals do not suffer a performance setback once they reach their destination and mortality is not an issue.

Repeat custom has also been experienced by some of the programme farmers who sell through the marts, especially where weanlings are being purchased for export.

Maiden heifers that will be bred this winter in order to join the calving herd next year have now received their first shot of BVD and Lepto vaccines.

A second shot will be given later in autumn. This will give sufficient time for maiden heifers to develop an adequate level of immunity before the onset of the breeding season.

Table 1: Converting growth rate into kilos of liveweight per hectare/acre

	Daily growth rate kg/DM/HA						
	20	30	40	50	60	70	80
Kg/LW/HA	700-1,000	1,000-1,500	1,400-2,000	1,750-2,500	2,100-3,000	2,450-3,500	2,800-4,000
Kg/LW/Ac	280-400	420-600	560-800	700-1,000	850-1,200	1,000-1,400	1,100-1,600



## ON THE GROUND SAM CHESNEY

“Despite the rising input costs in the past two years, Sam has improved gross margin”

This week, we feature another one of the farms that the members of the programme visited earlier this month as part of their trip to Northern Ireland. The trip was an opportunity for the programme farmers to view at first hand some of the most progressive farms north of the border.

Three farms were visited and although they are individually targeting different markets for their cattle, they share the core principles of breeding and producing maximum weight gain from grassland.

### FARM DETAILS

Sam Chesney farms 77ha (190 acres) of grassland near Kircubbin, Co Down. The farm carries a spring calving herd of 130 suckler cows and 50 breeding ewes. The cows are predominantly Limousin bred, served with Limousin and Blue stock bulls. A Blonde bull was purchased



for use this year. The cows have a calving interval of 353 days and calve in a 10 to 12-week window, with heifers calving inside 10 weeks.

Male calves are finished as young bulls under 16 months of age through ABP Newry. The heifer calves are usually sold live at 15 to 18 months of age, targeting the high value replacement breeding market.

The farm is managed with maximum production efficiency in mind. Sam benchmarks his business annually through CAFRE and is regularly placed in the top 25% of NI suckler to beef farms. The farm is part of the Focus Farm programme and represents best practice to visiting

discussion groups.

### BENCHMARKING

Similar to the profit monitor analysis, benchmarking allows producers to calculate their costs of production and compare their farm business with the average production costs. Table 1 outlines the production costs on Sam's farm to a gross margin level. The costs are presented on a per cow basis.

The farm has a gross margin per hectare of £1,005/ha (€1,189/ha), although this does not include any costs for forage contractors in the variable costs. Deducting the forage contractor brings the gross margin to £900/ha (€1,071/ha), which is an exceptional level of performance. Output represents cattle sales, including cull cow sales, and the value of stock on farm at the beginning and end of the year.

Variable costs are common to all farms as they primarily include grassland (fertilizer,



Sam Chesney, right, outlines the different stages of production in his suckler to beef system to members of the BETTER farm programme.

grass seed, etc), concentrate and veterinary costs.

### PHYSICAL PERFORMANCE

Despite the rising input costs in the past two years, Sam has managed to improve his gross margin through improved animal performance in terms of fertility, carcass weight and the level of liveweight gain from grass.

Higher cull cow values and market price will also be a factor in the increase in

gross margin.

While his variable costs have increased, they are more than covered by an increase in farm output.

Table 2 outlines the physical performance of the farm. Stocking rate has increased substantially as Sam has focused heavily on grassland performance. The farm is now stocked at 2.81LU/ha and has decreased from 2012 levels when land was carrying 3LU/ha.

Improving sward quality and grassland management has seen cattle performance improve and concentrate use decrease from 758kg/cow in 2010 to 667kg/cow in 2012. Weaning weights of calves at 200 days of age typically ranges from 300kg to 320kg liveweight annually. The average mature cow weight on farm is 630kg liveweight, with cows weaning an average of 48% of their bodyweight in the past few years.

Table 1: Financial performance for Sam Chesney's farm

	2010-11	2011-12	2013-13	Average farm
Output per cow	£813 (€968)	£795 (€946)	£1014 (€1207)	£1019 (€1199)
Variable costs per cow	£365 (€434)	£381 (€453)	£441 (€525)	£467 (€549)
Gross margin per cow	£448 (€533)	£414 (€492)	£573 (€682)	£586 (€689)





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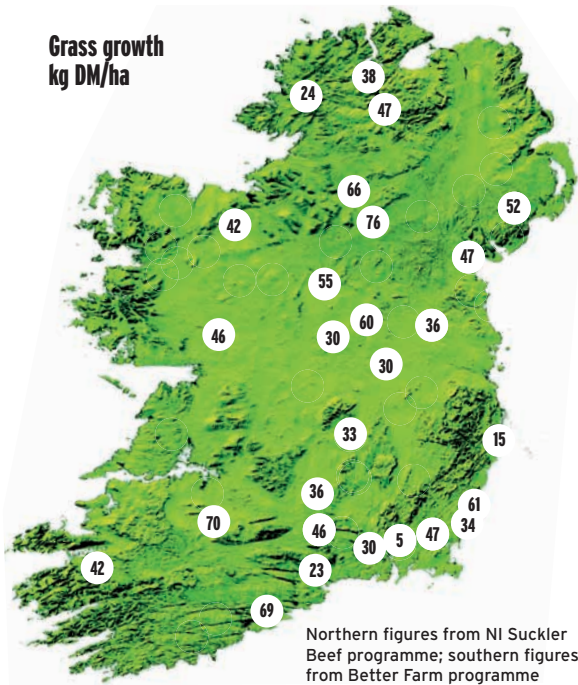
WEEK IN REVIEW

- In general, body condition scores are good for spring calving and autumn calving cows.
- In autumn calving herds, only first calving heifers are getting concentrates after calving.
- These animals are being fed 1kg to 2kg of ration, depending on body condition and grass quality.
- Autumn born weanlings are now being sold through the marts and directly off farm.
- Maiden heifers are receiving the first shot of a BVD and Lepto vaccine well in advance of the breeding season.

➤ Before housing, think back to last winter and where there was a high demand for labour when managing stock indoors. Now is the time to address this issue e.g. fitting a new drinking trough, installing lights in calving boxes, fixing feed barriers.

TOP TIP

Grass growth kg DM/ha



FARMER FOCUS

Charlie Crawford Co Donegal

The good weather has enabled me to get all my second cut silage harvested before the end of August and yields were excellent.

I harvested 44 acres of silage in total and have sufficient fodder in reserve in case of a long winter. Grass growth is excellent and I have 30 days of grazing ahead of the cattle at present.

With so much grass about, I cut and baled six acres of grazing at the start of September and it yielded 42 bales.

I managed to sell some silage also which will help to pay some of the additional costs from this spring.

Grass quality is excellent and I have last year's weanlings on the best swards, along with my ewes which are going to the ram in a couple of weeks' time.

The autumn bulls were last weighed on 18 August and weights ranged from 387kg up to 420kg. The average weight

for the group is 410kg, with a daily gain from birth of 1.23kg/day. The autumn heifers weighed from 300kg up to 424kg.

The heifers are really thriving and, like the autumn bulls, have been getting 2kg/day of a barley/maize ration for the past six weeks.

Autumn calves were weaned in early September. I am planning to start selling the weanlings in two weeks time, although some of the lighter calves will be held until the end of the month.

I scanned the cows on Saturday and had only one empty animal from 37 cows, which will be sold live. The cows are due to start calving on 22 November and will finish by late January.

I decided to move the calving back to November as only a few cows were calving in September and October.

The tighter calving interval will leave me with a more even group of weanlings for sale next year. All calves have been wormed twice this year and any lighter calves will get a third dose.



Mike Dillane Co Kerry

Grass growth has slowed over this past week. I measured 15kgDM/ha/day on Monday which leaves me with 24 days of grass ahead of livestock.

This is behind my target number of days, but I have reseeded land that is coming back into the rotation soon which should ease the pressure.

I am planning to graze the calves on the reseeded land for the winter. At the minute, I am running a much higher stocking rate than normal. I have an additional 20 heifers and young cows with calves at foot that were purchased recently, along with 20 culls that I am fattening.

These were purchased to tighten up my calving spread from six months to less than four months. I have also kept my weanlings much longer than usual to get as much weight as possible on them. I am examining the option of finishing bulls under 16 months. Bulls are currently on 4kg per

day of ration while heifers are on 2kg/day.

I have 20 calves left to wean from later calving cows and this will happen in the next week. I sold 20 weanlings recently at an average 390 kg at €1,050/head. I feel the option of finishing will suit me and will eliminate selling weanlings at less than €1,000/hd which is what I need to leave a margin.

I plan to spread the last of the nitrogen this week before the closing date with one bag of pasture sward per acre on the paddocks that will be grazed late into the season.

I have delayed reseeding 12 acres of silage ground due to time constraints until next spring. I will stitch the grass into this land and have it ready for cutting again in June.

My reclaimed land is performing above expectations and I already have about 30% higher production than last year, even though it was only grazed from 1 July.

I recently vaccinated my heifers for Lepto and salmonella and plan to inseminate them around the end of November.



Cows are predominantly Limousin breeding and served with Limousin and Blue sires.

months. In 2013, heifers had a calving interval of 377 days between their first and second calving.

In 2012, the heifers had a calving interval as low as 338 days, which clearly shows that with good management, and the correct genetics, it is possible to successfully calve heifers at 24 months and get them back in calf again.

GRASSLAND

Despite being located in a relatively dry region of Northern Ireland, Sam's farm is difficult to graze during periods of wet weather. Calving dates have moved to match the beginning of the grazing season with cows going to grass within days after calving.

This change in diet to a high plane of nutrition is partly responsible for the high levels of fertility being achieved.

Grazing land is grazed in rotational paddocks and larger fields are split using temporary electric wire. Clover is prominent in grazing swards and is used to reduce the level of nitrogen spread annually, which is typically around 100 units of nitrogen on grazing land. Grazing costs are around £49/head (€58/head) from February to mid-October, with daily gains on grass costing £0.16 per kilogram (€0.19/kg) of liveweight in weanlings.

AWARDS

The management on Sam's farm is first class and he is continually striving to improve. Throughout the visit, his grasp of production costs showed he is clearly in control of what is happening inside his farm gate and delivering profit.

In recent years, his expertise has been recognised among his farming peers, having won UK beef farmer of the year in 2011 and the Ulster Grassland Association Grassland Farmer of the Year in 2011. But according to Sam, the best reward possible is a profitable farm business.



FINISHING

Finishing bulls under 16 months of age is a specialised system. Feeding high levels of concentrates will obviously affect the profitability of the system, so a high level of performance is required. To reduce the concentrate input, Sam includes high quality grass silage in the finishing diet.

Calves are fed 2kg of creep feed from the beginning of

September until housing in October. After housing, bulls receive a fluke and worm dose and have their backs clipped. They are then placed on silage and built up to 4kg of meal until the end of January. Last year, the silage had a feed value of 12.9% protein, 12 MJ/kg DM of energy and 75 DMD.

From February on the bulls were built up to a maximum of 7kg of concentrates and 15kg of silage. The ration is made specifically to balance the silage analysis. While bulls will have gains of 1.5kg/day to 2kg/day, Sam is focused on kg/day of carcass gain. From housing, the bulls are finished on less than one tonne of concentrates.

Sam slaughtered the bulls this June at an average carcass weight of 387kg with an average daily carcass gain of 0.84kg/day. At a daily intake of ration of 7kg (£280/t) and 15kg silage (£30/t), the average daily feed cost was £2.41/day (€2.87/day). With beef prices of £3.80/kg (€4.52/kg) in June, these bulls would have been generating a daily income of £3.19/day (€3.79/day).

BREEDING

Heifers are bred to AI as part of a research programme with AFBI Hillsborough, with Limousin, Stabiliser and Angus sires used. Heifers are retained from within the herd and calve at 24

Table 2: Physical performance on Sam Chesney's farm

	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	Average farm
Kg liveweight/ha	859	805	929	647
Concentrates fed/cow	758	773	667	1066
Heifers - Av liveweight (kg)	481	433	574	513
Bulls - Av carcass weight (kg)	352	408	387	368