

BETTERfarm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Grazing heavy covers a priority before closing paddocks

Grass growth is still relatively good on the programme farms, with a weekly growth rate of 43kg DM/ha/day. The strong late season growth has presented a problem for the farms and that is being able to graze off all grass before housing.

For some farms, there are a few reasons as to why grazing off grass will be a problem:

- ➔ Suckler to weanling producers are now selling large numbers of young stock, which means they have less stock suitable for grazing late into the year.
- ➔ Some rented land needs to be cleared of livestock before the end of the month.
- ➔ Heavy farms will struggle to keep heavy cattle out late into the year, without damaging the sward.
- ➔ Paddocks are now being closed up for an early turnout of priority stock. There may be a temptation to go back into a closed paddock once this rotation has finished, if the ground conditions are good. Do not go back into a paddock once closed.

➔ NORTH WEST
The farms in the regions have 25 to 35 days ahead of cattle. Some farms have decided to take out grass as bales. This grass must be wilted and will be fed early in the winter as fermentation may be an issue. All spring calves have been weaned and will be used along with sheep to clean out swards over the winter.

➔ NORTH EAST
The farms in the region have 28 to 40 days ahead of cattle. There are sizeable autumn calving herds on the farms, which will be capable of utilising grass. The cattle will be moved regularly to prevent any damage to swards. Paddocks are not always being grazed down tight. Calves will clean out residual grass later.

➔ SOUTH EAST
Grazing days ahead are lower in the region due to drought conditions in September. Farms have 20 to 30 days ahead, although growth has picked up again. Utilisation will be less of an issue on the drier farms. These farms are still planning to start closing paddocks from this week onwards.

➔ SOUTH WEST
The farms have 25 to 40 days ahead. The heavier farms spread less nitrogen in the final rotations to avoid the possibility of a large surplus building up. None of the farms is set up for sheep grazing, so light weanlings and autumn calves will be used to graze off grass this autumn.

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

*during period of poor utilisation, use figures at the lower end of the range.



ON THE GROUND

MARK MAXWELL

“While the grazing season started in difficult conditions, it is certainly ending on a high”

Mark Maxwell farms 110ha near Kilbeggan, Co Westmeath. Of the area farmed, 89ha is in grassland and carries 90 suckler cows through to finish as steers and heifers. The cows are split 50:50 into spring (February to April) and autumn (August to October) calving.

Heifers are served with Limousin and the mature cows served with Charolais. Natural service and AI are both used to breed cows. Bulls are selected for ease of calving and growth rates.

Cows are a mix of Simmental and Angus cross cows, but in recent years Mark has been purchasing in-calf Hereford cross Friesian heifers as his replacements. Heifers are purchased for around €1,200 to €1,300, depending on quality.

By next year, 60% of the herd will be Hereford cross. The main reason for the change is that Mark wants to keep a smaller cow that will produce plenty of milk from

- ➔ KEY POINTS**
- ➔ Start closing paddocks from this week. On wet farms do not re-graze any paddock grazed off since 15 October.
 - ➔ Make sure wetter paddocks are grazed now when conditions allow.
 - ➔ Close up some dry fields for turnout in spring.
 - ➔ Prioritise grazing groups to remain at grass.
 - ➔ Be flexible in the grazing management.
 - ➔ Spring grazing will support higher liveweight gain than autumn grass.



Despite the good growing conditions, Mark has been closing up paddocks for an early turnout since 1 October. “Delaying the closing date is eating into next spring’s grass which is worth more to me than late autumn grazing. My cattle will have higher growth rates in March and April. If they miss out on spring grazing, they will never catch up,” states Mark.

➔ AUTUMN GRAZING
In autumn, the grazing management should be changed to focus on two aspects:

- ➔ Managing livestock to keep



With heavy grass covers on farm, it is important that this grass is utilised before closing for the winter. Using a temporary electric fence will help to increase grass utilisation.

grass utilisation and cattle performance high.

- ➔ Closing up paddocks in an orderly manner so that there is adequate spring grazing available next year.

While the grazing season started in difficult conditions, it is certainly ending on a high. Being able to hold cattle out late in the year is helping to shorten the winter feeding period.

Given the amount of grass ahead of cattle, it is tempting to keep grazing until ground conditions and weather will no longer permit cattle to remain outdoors.

But it is important to remember that the later a field is closed up this autumn, then the later the date of the first grazing next spring. Delaying the turnout date next year will mean that store cattle will be missing out on the opportunity for cheap liveweight gain through compensatory growth.

➔ WHY CLOSE EARLY
Spring grazing (March-April) can support a higher level of animal performance than at any other stage of the grazing season. As a rule of thumb, one week of grazing in spring is worth two weeks in the autumn.

Grass in mid March tends to have a higher dry matter (DM) compared with grass in late autumn, therefore cattle grazing in spring will have a higher energy intake compared to animals grazing in late October.

Mark uses ICBF to weight record his cattle. Yearling steers were turned out to grass on 20 February. From turnout until June, the yearling stores gained 1.8kg liveweight/day from a grass only diet. In contrast, the same group were gaining 1.1kg/day over September, which is still a fantastic level of growth but shows the potential of early grazing.

At a grazing cost of €0.05/kg DM of grass and the stated weight gain for Mark’s herd, a 500kg steer grazing in the spring would have a cost



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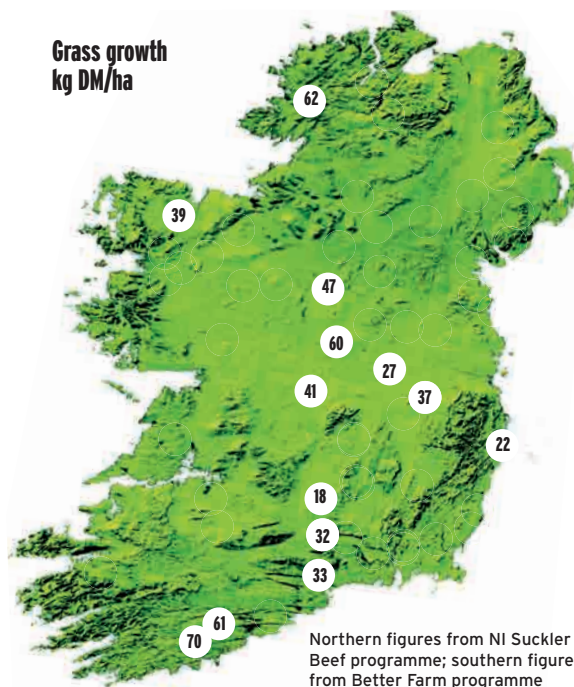


WEEK IN REVIEW

- Grass growth is still high for the time of year.
- The farms have between 20 to 40 days of grass ahead of cattle.
- Selling of weanlings and stores has reduced grazing demand which has let grass get too far ahead.
- Prioritising grazing groups, using sheep and removing some bales are some methods being adopted to utilise grass.

- Paddocks that were recently reseeded should have received a post emergence spray by now. Weeds are easier to control when they are at the seedling stage and actively growing. Sprays will have a much better plant contact now, rather than waiting until spring when rye-grass has tillered out.
- Avoid spraying within 24 hours of rainfall.

TOP TIP

Grass growth
kg DM/ha

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



If cattle have free access to larger grazing areas, then grass utilisation will be lower as grass becomes spoiled through cattle walking and lying. This rejected grass will cause a build up of dead grass over the winter if it is not removed.

of €0.27/kg liveweight gain. Compare this to the same 500kg steer grazing in the autumn and the cost increases to €0.46/kg of liveweight gain.

Presently, a group of 16 steers are being supplemented with 3kg of barley to sustain a target growth rate of 1kg liveweight/day. At a cost of €190/tonne, the cost of 1kg of liveweight gain increases to €0.95 for cattle grazing into late October.

AUTUMN PLANNER

For spring turnout, farms should follow the spring grazing planner. Likewise, when closing up paddocks, farms should follow an au-

tumn grazing planner. On Mark's farm, paddocks are simply closed in the normal rotation once they have been grazed.

As he has been closing from 1 October, he is targeting a turnout date around 15 February. For other farms, it is not too late to start closing off paddocks for an early to mid March turnout date. Most farms should target a closing date of 15 to 20 October. This means that a field that was grazed in the past week should not be grazed again.

For every week this closing date is delayed, the potential turnout date is delayed by two weeks. Closing one field

at a time in rotation means that stock can still be held outdoors until late autumn. Closing paddocks now does not mean all cattle have to be housed early.

Farms should be working on a 60:40 grazing policy, whereby once they start closing off paddocks, they should aim to have 60% of the farm grazed off by a set date.

For Mark's farm, his target is to have 60% of the farm grazed out by late October and the remaining 40% by mid November.

PRIORITISE STOCK

While these dates will be dictated by the weather, prioritise cattle groups so that lighter stock can remain outdoors if ground conditions deteriorate. This will ensure heavy grass covers are grazed off, but you need to be flexible in your grazing management.

Mark intends to house his autumn calving cows first so that they are settled on the winter diet before the start of the breeding season. These cows are bred to AI, so housing early facilitates easier management.

The next group of stock to be housed are the autumn born 2012 bulls which weigh approximately 500kg liveweight. These groups will be housed in the coming weeks, regardless of weather and grass supply. They will be followed by heavy stores that will be finished indoors in January. Weanlings will stay out until the farm is fully grazed off.

GRASS UTILISATION

On the majority of the programme farms, there is still an abundance of grazing ahead of cattle. On Mark's

farm, there are 20 days ahead of most stock groups, which will see young stock grazing well into mid November.

Compared to last year, the current grazing situation is an enviable position to be in. However, being able to utilise all of this grass will cause problems for some farms, especially heavy farms.

It is important that heavy covers of grass over 2,500kg DM/ha (10 to 12cm) are cleaned off before the paddock is closed for the winter. Leaving heavy covers over winter will cause a build up of a dead, white grass. This will inhibit spring growth until it is removed.

While prioritising lighter stock for grazing late into the year will improve utilisation, there are other methods that can be used, such as:

- Strip grazing grass so that cattle are not trampling and spoiling the entire sward.
- Trampling will increase the percentage of rejected grass.
- Using on-off grazing methods where calves and light weanlings graze for a few hours daily before re-housing at night, will allow grazing into late November.

- Using sheep/store lambs to graze off grass and increase the grazing demand.

Once grazing residuals have been cleaned out to 3cm to 4cm (400kg DM/ha), Mark will close the paddock up. Grazing down tight will encourage plant tillering, which is important for young reseeded swards.

He aims to have an average grazing cover of around 8cm (1,000kg DM/ha) in spring when cattle are turned out. Cattle will be gradually turned out on a weekly basis depending on grass supplies and the weather.

FARMER FOCUS

Trevor Minion
Co Wicklow

I have encountered two periods of drought on the farm this year. Only for the rain that fell over the last three weeks I would be in serious trouble with grass shortage. Grass growth has taken off in the past three weeks from 15kg to 46kg DM/ha/day.

A combination of rainfall, high soil temperatures and nitrogen, applied in mid-September, has increased growth rates. I also reckon there has been a response from nitrogen that was spread earlier in the summer and is still present in the soil. My farm cover is now 628kg DM/ha and my demand is 23kg DM/ha/day.

Grass utilisation is excellent and has been so all year. I have approximately 27 days of grazing ahead of cattle. However, with the heavy rain forecast this week, that could change. I am planning to start closing paddocks for spring grass in the next week and spread farmyard



manure on paddocks, after grazing.

My winter barley yielded well this year and the harvest went smoothly. Rotating the barley fields will help freshen up some land and I reseeded some tillage ground in August. The sward is doing very well since it got rain.

The field was ploughed, tilled with a disc and power-harrow and sown with an Einbock drill. It received three bags of 10-10-20/acre to establishment. I sprayed it with a post-emergence spray (Pastor) two weeks ago to help kill any weeds.

I hope to graze it with my yearling dairy-beef calves next week. All calves received their third worm dose in mid-September. Beef heifers and steers will be housed at the end of the month for finishing. Silage analysis has come back and I am very happy with the results. It was harvested in ideal conditions on 2 June and ensiled in a pit. The DMD is 78%, crude protein 13.7% and DM 31.6% which should provide a solid base for my store and finishing diets.

Heinz Eggert
Co Kildare

Grass is still growing well here on the Sheplands Farm. We recorded a growth of 37kg DM/ha/day over the past seven days, which is well ahead of stock demand at 27kg DM/ha/day. Average farm cover is running at 975kg/ha.

I hate to say it, but because demand is somewhat lower than our growth, we are having problems getting fields grazed off quickly enough and closed for next spring. Fields that have been closed are greening up and the temptation is there to go back into a paddock for a quick grazing.

I have learned from other years that this late grazing does not work and is detrimental to the grazing plans next spring. We have applied some of the remaining watery slurry onto those fields that have been closed.

We currently have a healthy 23 days of grazing ahead of stock and this is where we want to be. As of today, we have 14% of the grazing block closed and this is earmarked

for the first grazing next spring. We are aiming for a minimum of 120 days rest for paddocks over the winter and some growth will accumulate over this time. We weighed all the calves last week and are very happy with the results.

Our bull calves have averaged 310kg and gained 1.28kg/day since birth. Our heifer calves averaged 281kg and gained 1.11kg/day. I am especially happy with the group of Hereford cross calves from my two-year-old heifers. They look like a promising group of calves.

Calves have been creep grazing for the past three weeks and consuming 1.2kg/day of concentrates. Weaning starts tomorrow and calves will be dosed and vaccinated for pneumonia, before the stressful period around housing.

We have not received any results from the blood samples taken from cows that scanned empty in August. We are hoping they will come by the end of the month. The outcome of the results will not change our plan to cull these cows.

