

# BETTERfarm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

## Housing continues with increasing rainfall



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As rainfall becomes more frequent, the programme farms have continued to house heavier cattle, especially in the west and north of the country where the heavier, wetter farms are generally located.

Autumn calves that have been housed along with their mothers have access to grazing land beside the cattle accommodation. Allowing the calf to creep outside not only improves the calf's health, it is having a positive effect on the cow fertility.

The restricted suckling is helping to shorten the period from calving until the cow comes back into heat. Some of the farms have commented that these cows are also displaying stronger heats, which is especially helpful for the herds that use AI instead of stock bulls.

An additional benefit is

that the cows are able to hold body condition once housed. From previous experience, the programme farms that restrict the calf from suckling the cow have not seen any setback in calf performance.

In general, most calves are between three to four weeks old before they are allowed to creep outside to graze. There is a risk of younger calves developing hypothermia during prolonged cold and wet periods.

### GRAZING MANAGEMENT

The policy of grazing off the covers on naturally wet fields

during early to mid October, when ground conditions were good, has paid off. Drier paddocks are now being grazed off which has helped to delay the housing date on some farms.

Ground conditions are dictating which stock groups are grazing on certain paddocks.

On drier farms, autumn calving cows remain at grass to clean out paddocks and the aim is to try and keep these cows outside until they are settled back in calf.

Bull weanlings are also on drier paddocks as they are generally less tolerant

of grazing in wet conditions than heifer weanlings. Some farms continue to supplement cattle with concentrates at grass, with hardcore areas, or laneways, being used as feeding areas to reduce sward damage.

Bull weanlings are not being made to graze paddocks out tight. Instead, they are grazing down to 5cm to 6cm and being moved on. The residual is being cleaned off with lighter calves, or sheep where they are present.

### ANIMAL HEALTH

Some of the farms have reported problems with liver

and rumen fluke, based on the results from taking dung samples.

Since treating the cattle with an appropriate product, they have noticed a significant improvement in performance.

The problem has occurred on both heavy and dry farms and is most likely a carry-over from last year.

These cattle will need a further sample in three to four weeks time as they may well have re-ingested fluke, or immature fluke will have since matured and be visible in a dung sample.



## ON THE GROUND SEAN COUGHLAN

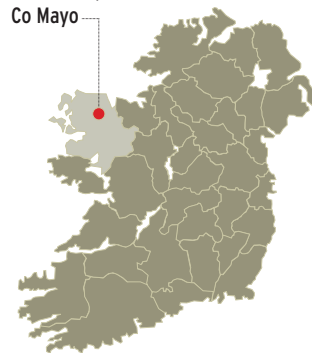
“Measuring grass allows Sean to budget how many days ahead of stock there is each week”

As part of the BETTER Farm programme, measuring grass growth on a weekly basis is part and parcel of improving grassland management. Grass is a crop and it is the cheapest feed resource that any Irish suckler herd has. Growing more grass and having higher quality grazing available will result in two things at the end of the season – heavier cattle and less concentrates fed during the year.

Just like cattle performance should be monitored to determine which cows are producing the fastest growing calves, grass should also be monitored to determine which paddocks are responsive to fertilizer and which are not. These poor performing fields may need to be reseeded to improve growth.

Sean Coughlan has been measuring grass on his farm over the past four years after encouragement from his local adviser Alan Nolan. For Sean, walking the farm

Lahardane,  
Co Mayo



every Monday serves three purposes:

- ☛ To record the grass growth in the past seven days.
- ☛ To assess how much grass is available for livestock to graze.
- ☛ To assess ground conditions across the whole farm.

### FARM DETAILS

The herd calves from December to April and this year, the calving interval was 354 in 2013 compared with 381 days in 2012.

The herd is bred through AI with a mix of Limousin, Blue and Charolais sires pre-

dominantly used.

Calves have previously been sold as weanlings in the autumn, but this year, Sean is considering a different market option by finishing some of the bulls and overwintering heifers for sale in the spring. The main reasons for changing the marketing policy are:

- ☛ The farm has an abundance of silage in store.
- ☛ 10 cull cows will be sold so there is additional housing space available to carry weanlings over winter.
- ☛ Increasing the sale value of calves by finishing or selling at a heavier weight.

### GRASS MEASUREMENT

The grazing block on the farm consists of 23ha to carry 45 suckler cows. Grass is measured weekly using a plate meter and the figures are then fed into the computer to determine the grass growth.

Simpler methods can also be used, such as having the ideal grass height marked on a welly boot to indicate when



Using temporary electric fencing is helping to increase grass utilisation on Sean Coughlan's farm.

cattle should be entering and leaving a field.

Regardless of the method used, the main purpose of getting out and walking the farm on a weekly basis will quickly focus farmers into being much more critical of their grassland.

Pulling up to a field entry or driving through fields that cattle are grazing will do nothing to help you gauge how much grass is present on farm.

For Sean, measuring grass allows him to budget how many days ahead of stock there is at the start of every week.

This means that every Monday lunchtime, Sean will know whether he needs to sow more fertilizer, whether he can skip and close paddocks for silage or whether he will have to reduce the size of a stock group if there is a potential grazing shortage ahead.

In the past week, grass

growth on Sean's farm was 34kgDM/ha/day. The farm has an average grass cover of 1,216kg DM/ha and 33 days ahead of stock.

What these figures basically mean is:

### 1. GRASS GROWTH

This is the amount of grass produced daily. It should be matched to the stock's grazing demand to determine whether or not there is enough grass growing to feed cattle. For example, Sean currently has grazing 22 cows and 43 weanlings on 23ha.

The cows weigh on average 650kg liveweight and weanlings weigh 350kg, therefore he is carrying 29,350kg of liveweight on 23ha, or 1,276kg of liveweight/ha.

At grass, cattle will eat approximately 2% of their body weight every day. At Sean's stocking rate, cattle will have a demand for 25kgDM/ha of grass every day (1,279kg X 0.02 = 25kg).

In general, if grass growth is higher than demand, then a surplus will develop. Figures 1 and 2 show the grass growth and stock demand on Sean's farm over the past two years.

### 2. AVERAGE FARM COVER (AFC)

This is the average amount of grass available for cattle to graze. The ideal grass height for cattle to start grazing at is 10cm to 12cm (1,600kgDM/ha).

They should then be grazed down to 4cm to 5cm. As grass is measured in kg DM/ha, 4cm is a residual (the remaining grass that was not grazed off) cover of approximately 400kgDM/ha.

With an AFC on Sean's farm of 1,216kg DM/ha, this means there is 816kg DM/ha of grass available for grazing.

This means that with a daily stock demand of 25kg DM/ha of grass, there are 33 days of grazing available





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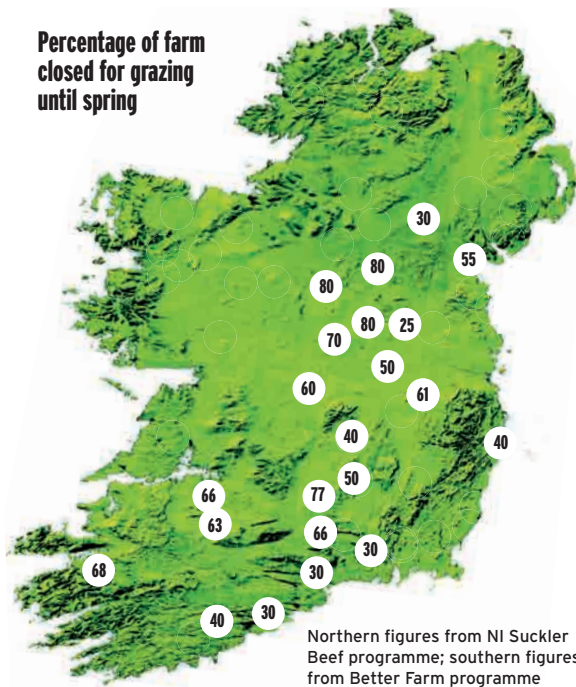
## WEEK IN REVIEW

- Cattle continue to be housed as rainfall becomes more frequent.
- Autumn calves have access to creep outside during the day while the cow remains housed.
- Separating the cow and calf is helping to bring cows back into heat, with stronger heats being displayed.
- A number of farms have taken dung samples and have had heavy fluke infestations.
- Where cattle have been treated for fluke and are still at grass, a second dung sample may be required in three to four weeks time..

➤ Make sure calves have been covered for clostridial diseases, such as blackleg. Blackleg spores are present in the soil, so take caution when feeding calves out of troughs where there is plenty of soil exposed. Likewise, be careful if feeding meals on top of grazed grass.

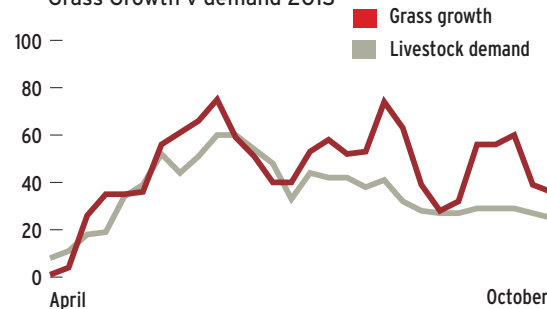
**TOP TIP**

Percentage of farm closed for grazing until spring



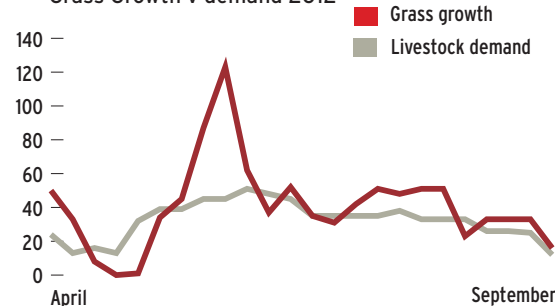
**Figure 1**

Grass Growth v demand 2013



**Figure 2**

Grass Growth v demand 2012



weight of 26 bull calves was 370kg two weeks ago, while 20 heifers weighed 312kg on the same day.

With a total of 15,860kg of liveweight produced from 23ha and subtracting the value of the bales from the fertilizer costs, Sean's grazing land produced 690kg/ha of liveweight at a cost of €0.27/kg.

The 23ha of grazing land produced nine tonnes DM/ha this year from 5 April to 22 October.

Reseeding is also a big part of maintaining a high stocking rate and growing more grass each year.

For Sean, the benefits of reseeded is having an earlier start for grass growth in spring and, conversely, having higher growth rates in autumn.

This is helping to shorten winter on his farm which

would previously have lasted six months before he started taking grassland management seriously.



### ADVISER COMMENT

"Using weanlings to good effect can help to manage heavy covers of grass late this autumn. Prioritise groups so that the more efficient cattle utilize grass. Making sure that the soil fertility is being addressed and grass is being reseeded will grow more grass annually, especially at the start and end of the season." - Shane McHugh.

## FARMER FOCUS

### Dan Fingleton Co Offaly

The mild weather this autumn has really prolonged the grass growing season on my farm.

Like many farmers, my biggest challenge is now being able to utilise this grass as efficiently as possible.

Unfortunately, I am losing a substantial block of land that I have rented over the last few years and, therefore, I increased the stocking rate on this land block in order to graze out the paddocks before bringing the cattle home.

As a result, grass covers have been allowed to build up on my home farm during late September and October.

All stock have now moved back to my home farm and the main priority now is to graze off these paddocks as best as I can in order to close them up for spring grass. I closed the paddocks closest to the sheds first so that I can use them for creep grazing my autumn born calves once they are housed.

I have approximately



50% of the home farm closed to date and depending on how ground conditions hold up, I should have all stock housed within the next two to three weeks.

Due to the nature of the land I farm, I used an oral drench to treat all cattle against liver fluke and worms. I will faecal sample all stock around three weeks after housing to monitor for any remaining internal parasites present (Liver Fluke, Rumen Fluke, Worms).

After taking blood samples and consulting with my vet earlier in the year, we decided to increase the copper supplementation rate in my cows. The spring cows were also given a multi vitamin/mineral bolus and two copper boluses.

I took two silage samples last week from my first and second cut crops, so hopefully the nutritional quality will be better than last year. I carried out some drainage work and reseeded some paddocks in late August. Hopefully next year this land will be capable of carrying more stock and growing more grass.

### Willie Treacy Co Louth

Weaning is in full swing here in Hackballscross. We currently have half of the spring calving cows weaned and would have the second half weaned if the weather had not deteriorated so much. We tried to keep weaning as stress free as possible by taking a few calves every couple of days.

All cows that have been weaned are now housed. Calves will stay out as long as possible and are currently eating 1kg to 2kg of concentrates daily. Calves received a worm dose two weeks before weaning.

Autumn calving went well with only a few assisted calvings from the 50 autumn cows. These cows are currently being served with 50% of the cows with the Simmental bull. The other 50% are with a Blue bull. The maiden heifers are also running with an easy calving Limousin bull. Autumn calves were vaccinated for IBR at dehorning.

We took the decision in September to house a group

of spring heifers and some autumn 2011 heifers that were destined for finishing. We were running tight on grass at the time and decided that this group could be housed and stepped up onto a higher level of concentrates. They are currently on 8kg of a three way mix of rolled barley, maize meal and maize distillers. This comes out at 1.00 UFV and 14.9 % protein. These heifers will hopefully be ready for the Christmas market.

Autumn 2012 bulls have just been sold. They weighed 509kg and went to a local feedlot. We weighed up the pros and cons of finishing them, but there would have been too much pressure on housing to keep them until next January. The autumn 2012 bulls gained 1.22kg/day between the 2nd August and 18th October. Their lifetime daily gain is 1.05kg/day. This is down a little on last year due to the tough spring conditions. We are also due to do some faecal sampling once all animals have been housed. We currently have about 55% of the farm closed up as of today.



if there was to be no further grass growth this year.

### 3. DAYS AHEAD

Put simply, if cattle entered a new paddock today and there was no further grass growth, then there should be 33 days before the cattle re-enter this paddock at the stated stocking rate.

### GRASS UTILISATION

There is no point in trying to grow more grass if it is not being properly utilised. With heavy grass covers so late into the year, Sean has weaned his cows to avoid damaging swards as ground conditions start to deteriorate.

Weanlings will be used to graze off all paddocks using a strip grazing method. The reason for strip grazing is that Sean does not want weanlings to spoil the grass quality by having free access to roam over a paddock.

In the first half of this

year when fodder was tight, cows and calves were on/off grazing using a similar practice.

Cows would be let out to graze for a period of three hours before re-housing. They were allowed out twice daily to graze, but if they became unsettled, they were re-housed immediately.

While to some this may seem labour intensive, it is no different to dairy cow management.

It had the desired effect as Sean was not forced to spend excessive sums of money buying forage and cow fertility did not suffer. Scanning results indicate 92% of cows served are settled in-calf.

### GRASS PERFORMANCE

Being stocked at over 2LU/ha requires a high level of management. On many farms, stocking rate has increased but little has changed in terms of grassland management. Soil fertility is crucial to supporting a high stocking rate, especially on heavier farms.

In 2013, there has been 60 tonnes of lime spread on Sean's farm, while 40 tonnes was spread last year. Fertilizer has changed to 10-10-20 and 18-6-12 as well as CAN.

Around 120 units/acre was applied on grazing ground this year which, at an average cost of €360/tonne between compounds and CAN, is approximately €90 worth of nitrogen spread over the season.

The fertilizer bill on the grazing land was approximately €5,112. A total of 78 bales were made from surplus grass this year which are worth €20, minus €10 to make.

The average weaning