

# BETTERfarm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

## Cattle are gradually returning to grass



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Weather conditions have been slowly improving across the southern regions of the country. The programme farmers with drier land have capitalised on the opportunity to get

slurry out, relieving the pressure on storage tanks. Due to that pressure on tanks, there has been a greater preference for spreading slurry rather than opting to spread bagged fertilizer. There are some farms that have spread a combination of both, with slurry going on lower grass covers and chemical nitrogen being spread on stronger covers. Nitrogen has been applied at a rate of between 27 units and 40 units per acre. Depending on the soil analysis, fertilizer type varies from urea to CAN and 10-10-20.

Soil temperatures are relatively good on the farms, with most soils recording between 6°C and 7°C over the past fortnight. At these temperatures grass will be growing. The biggest problem has been a lack of nitrogen and this is evident where swards are turning yellow. **Turnout** Improving ground conditions has allowed some of the farms to resume on/off grazing of lighter stores or weanlings. Some farms have taken the opportunity to turn small

numbers of cattle, at stocking rates of 500kg to 1,000kg of liveweight per hectare (200kg to 400kg liveweight per acre) out permanently. Where ground conditions are still reasonably marginal and cattle are at grass, they are grazing paddocks in smaller blocks and being moved on to the next paddock earlier. This is helping to prevent sward damage. As cattle are grazing in smaller blocks, they are still able to clean out paddocks and remove any dead matter that has built up in the sward over winter. The cost benefit of early

turnout is essential for generating herd profit. Store cattle that were housed and fed a winter diet of 20kg of silage (€30/t) and 2kg of concentrates (€260/t) have a daily feed cost of €1.12/animal. At a target liveweight gain of 0.6kg/day, the cost of gaining one kilogram of liveweight on a winter diet is €1.86. Cattle turned out to grass in a fit condition, that have had the meal withdrawn from the diet at least two weeks pre-turnout, will benefit from compensatory growth. Daily liveweight gains of 1.2kg to 1.5kg are com-

mon over a 100-day period for cattle grazing from early March. Assuming grass has a value of 5c/kg DM, a 400kg store gaining 1.5kg/day of liveweight has a cost per kilogram gain of €0.26/animal. Cattle are being slowly filtered out to grass as the programme farmers follow an individually tailored spring rotation planner. More cattle will be turned out as grass growth increases. Maiden heifers that are being retained for breeding and weanlings are treated as priority groups and are predominantly the first cattle groups to be turned out.



## ON THE GROUND

### WILLIE TREACY

“The first rotation should last approximately eight weeks to allow gradual turnout of stock”



Throughout the BETTER Farm programme, the advantages of early turnout of cattle have been well publicised. There is no doubt that getting weanlings and store cattle out to grass early in the spring leads to increased weight gain at a low cost. In some suckler systems, it is this early grazing that can be the difference between profit and loss. There is no set date to define what is termed an early turnout. In most cases, the biggest factor in determining when livestock go back out to grass is the land type. Free draining ground is obviously a natural advantage as it is better suited to carrying cattle during wet weather. Early turnout on these farms can occur in February, whereas in some of the more northern regions of the country the earliest some farms can get cattle back to grass is in early April. There is nothing wrong with that date. The main point is that farmers on heav-

ier land are trying to make more of their grazing land, despite serious limitations. The fact that cattle are back grazing by a fortnight to one month earlier than normal, will still have a positive effect on performance. It is crucial to plan for turnout and the grazing season. Early turnout does not mean opening the shed door and letting every animal out to grass. Instead, it should be a phased, planned approach. **Using the spring rotation planner** The spring rotation planner is a simple table that can be used to set weekly targets for grazing in spring. If used properly, it allows the farmer to match the gradual turnout of cattle to the available grass covers, so that once animals are out they can remain out. Table 1 is an example of the information required for a spring rotation planner. The farmer enters the date in the relevant column, the number of acres to be grazed each week and the actual

number grazed. The first rotation should last approximately eight weeks to allow gradual turnout of stock and include the silage ground in the grazing area. The information required by the farmer includes: ➤ The target turnout date for the first group of stock. ➤ The date you want to begin the second rotation ➤ When you expect grass growth to match stock demand, i.e. the magic day. The rotation planner is merely a guideline to follow. Start off by turning light

weanlings out at a rate of 500kg to 1,000kg/ha (one 200kg to 400kg animal per acre). Set out to have a certain area of land grazed off in the first week and use the table to see if you are ahead or falling behind this target. If ahead of the weekly target do not turn out any more stock. Offer some concentrates to slow down grazing. If you are behind the weekly target, and ground conditions allow it, you can turn out some additional stock. The rotation planner will

ensure that there is sufficient grass ahead of stock to allow time for enough regrowth at the start of the second rotation. It will also ensure that grass does not run out before the start of the second rotation. Due to wet conditions this spring, turnout has probably been delayed on most farms, so this year a dry farm should (see Figure 1): ➤ Turn out light weanlings from late February to early March. ➤ Have 40% of the farm, which includes the silage ground, grazed off by 20 to 25 March. ➤ Have 60% of the farm grazed off by 5 April. ➤ Have 100% of the farm grazed off by 20 April. While a heavier farm should: ➤ Turn out light weanlings by 20 March. ➤ Have 40% of the farm, including silage area, grazed off by 5 April. ➤ Have 60% of the farm grazed off by 20 April. ➤ Have 100% of the farm grazed off by 1 May.

**Farm details** Willie Treacy has been involved in the BETTER Farm programme since the beginning of phase one and he is using the spring rotation planner to get animals back to grass from this week onward. Willie runs 110 cows on 65ha of grassland outside Dundalk, Co Louth. Stocking rate increased from 1.65LU/ha to 2.95LU/ha in 2013 and maintaining such a high stocking rate requires excellent grassland management. Cows are evenly split between spring and autumn calving. Male progeny is sold as stores and heifers are finished, depending on the price. **Planning for turnout** With almost 70% of the spring herd now calved, housing space is under pressure. In previous years, Willie would have had yearling bulls and heifers out grazing from mid-February, but persistent rainfall has delayed turnout in 2014. The first group of stock to go out to

Table 1 : Spring rotation planner

Date week ends	% grazed	Target area grass weekly (acres)	Actual area grazed (acres)
Week 1			
Week 2			
Week 3			
Week 4	40%		
Week 5			
Week 6	60%		
Week 7			
Week 8	100%		
Second rotation start date			





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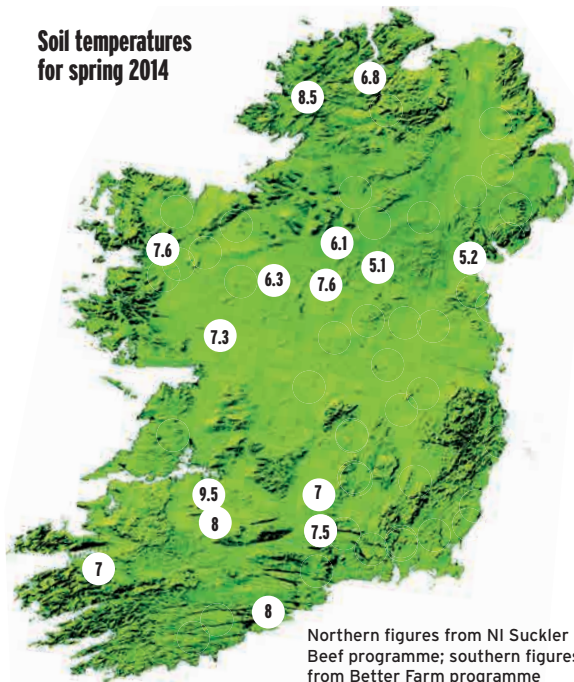
## WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Improved ground conditions have seen an increase in slurry applications on some of the programme farms.
- ➔ Slurry has been preferred to bagged fertilizer for early nitrogen, mainly due to storage tanks coming under pressure as they near full capacity.
- ➔ Bagged nitrogen has been spread. Soil analysis is being used to determine what fertilizer type is being spread.
- ➔ Most of the farmers have walked the farms to record opening grass covers. This information is being used to complete spring rotation planners.
- ➔ Cattle have been gradually turned out to grass over the past week. Grazing blocks are flexible to suit group size.

When turning out cattle, allowing them to stand on a hard-core laneway for a short period before they go onto grass can prevent cattle from damaging swards when fighting to establish dominance. Walking cattle to the farthest paddocks on the farms can also decrease this activity.

**TOP TIP**

Soil temperatures for spring 2014



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



Heavy covers will be grazed once cattle have settled into grazing. This will improve grass utilisation, compared with turning cattle straight from the shed onto heavy covers.

grass will be 40 heifers born in spring 2013. In preparation for turnout, these animals have been on 2kg of concentrates and silage from housing on 12 November until 31 January, at which point the meal was cut down to 1kg/day per animal. Meal was removed last week in preparation for turnout.

### Stock priority

The group of 40 heifers will be split into two, with the first 20 to 25 heifers going out this week, depending on the weather. Willie is planning to put them to drier silage ground with medium grass covers (6cm or 800kg DM/ha) until they have settled into grazing.

After a couple of days, they will then move to start grazing the heaviest covers (9cm or 1,250kg DM/ha) on a 20-acre grazing block. The remaining yearling heifers will then go out onto the drier silage ground and follow a similar routine.

The reason for the split turnout is to prevent too many animals going out at

once and poaching ground if conditions turn unfavourable. Going into the medium covers first is to prevent low utilisation of heavy covers by freshly turned out animals, through lying and trampling.

Once grass growth increases, the group will be tightened up into one group with a potential 25% of these heifers separated out for breeding.

### Cows

Going by the rotation planner, the second group of stock to be turned out is the autumn calves, which will be weaned through on/off grazing, with the cows remaining being housed.

The calves have been cut to 1kg/day of concentrates and will stay on this feed level until early April.

There is a 20-acre grazing block allocated for these animals. The autumn cows will be the last group to go back to grass and used as a sweeper group to control grass quality. Spring calving cows are the third group to

grazing paddocks until after second-cut silage.

### Silage area

Willie's policy is to only close up silage ground once there is substantial grass growth and greater than stock demand. Through weekly grass monitoring, he knows when this is possible. He believes closing ground and spreading up to 100 units of nitrogen per acre when growth rate is ahead of stock demand gives a better return on fertilizer, rather than closing early and spreading nitrogen in the hope of increasing growth.

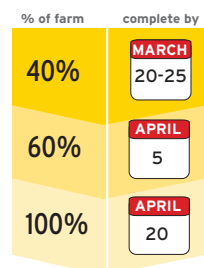
Tight grazing of silage ground is now part and parcel of spring grazing on the farm. Silage yields have not been reduced by grazing into April, with first cuts usually hitting 10t/acre freshweight.

All grazing ground will be slurried after the first grazing, with 13 to 14 units/acre of CAN applied after each subsequent grazing.

**Figure 1**  
Spring rotation planner targets



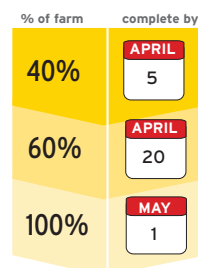
**Dry farm**  
Turn out light weanlings from late February to early March



Grazing area completed



**Heavy farm**  
Turn out light weanlings by 20 March



Grazing area completed

## FARMER FOCUS

### David Mitchell Co Monaghan

The autumn-calving cows were scanned last week. There are 15 cows in this group and all but one are in-calf. I will decide what to do with her shortly, but it is unlikely that I will keep her. Finishing prices are low, so maybe the mart is the best option.

These cows were on ad-lib silage and 2kg of meal from housing until now. The meal will be removed from the diet now that they are in-calf. The spring herd is halfway through calving.

So far, there have been no problems which is always a welcome relief. There are 30 cows in this group to be calved and they were served with a Charolais stock bull. I have some good grass covers on the farm, but the ground is too wet to carry stock.

My autumn weanlings and spring yearlings will be the first cattle to go to grass as soon as the land dries up. They are on



ad-lib silage and 1.5kg of meal. They will be weighed next week. I will cut the meal after they are weighed in preparation for turnout. Silage stocks are fine, with around eight weeks left for all stock on the farm.

I am planning to sow urea on grazing land as soon as the ground is capable of carrying machinery. Normally, I would have some nitrogen out by now, but every year is different.

Finishing cattle are coming fit for slaughter, but there are delays in getting them killed. Heifers will be slaughtered in three weeks. They are on 5kg of meal and ad-lib silage and I am hoping for 320kg to 330kg carcass weight.

I also run 75 ewes on the farm and they have just started lambing, so there is a heavy workload at present. The ewes were housed on 1 January and offered silage and meal.

I increased the meal feeding around 10 days ago to ewes with twins and triplets. They will hopefully go back to grass around a week after they lamb.

### Michael Smith Co Cavan

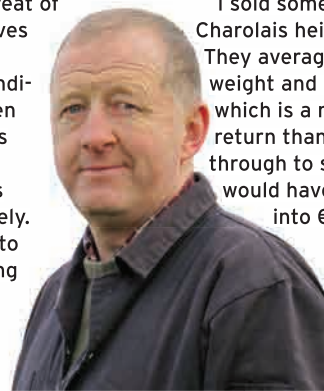
My spring calving has been going well so far. I started calving in late January and to date I have 23 cows calved from 34 cows. They should be finishing around St Patrick's Day.

These cows are calving mainly to my Charolais stock bull, although there is some AI used on certain cows. I lost one calf with a twisted gut.

Thankfully, I also had a set of twins born so that makes up for the lost animal. The earlier calved cows are still indoors and any cow that calves in March will go straight to grass.

This is a policy I have had for a few years and it helps to reduce the threat of disease to calves born later on.

Weather conditions have been good early this week and the grazing land is drying out nicely. I am planning to put some young stock out this week. I will start off by putting a



dozen yearling heifers out and then gradually add to this, if ground and weather permits.

They will go onto the silage ground first and I plan to slurry the remainder of the cutting ground with an umbilical pipeline as soon as it has been grazed.

The land was slurried with an umbilical system around three weeks ago.

I put 40,000 gallons of watery slurry out at a rate close to 3,000 gallons per acre. The autumn herd is bred to AI and is due to be scanned this weekend.

They are on silage only at present, with their calves on 2kg of meal. I am starting to wean them off over the coming weeks, as they are eating a considerable level of silage now.

I sold some heavily-fleshed Charolais heifers this week. They averaged 560kg live-weight and sold for €1,280, which is a much better return than taking them through to slaughter, as they would have struggled to kill into €1,200.

I sold two young cows that were not in-calf and they came into similar money.