

BETTERfarm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Grass growth steady on BETTER farms



KIERAN MAILEY
LIVESTOCK SPECIALIST
kmailey@farmersjournal.ie

Grass growth is steady on the programme farms. The farms in the south have been recording higher growth rates over the past few weeks than the farms in the north. Heavy

rainfall in the latter half of last week has checked growth rates slightly with the farms averaging 20kg DM/ha over the past week.

Paddocks that have been grazed off are seeing variable levels of re-growth. Re-seeded swards are obviously faster to respond to fertilizer applied. On older swards, the levels of ryegrass present in swards is influencing grass re-growth. With soil temperature holding steady between 6°C and 9°C, the farms are getting an economic response to fertilizer applied.

The farms are mostly using temporary paddocks

at this stage as they can be adjusted in size to suit the size of the group, the grass cover and ground conditions. On heavy covers, paddocks are smaller in size so that cattle can clean out paddocks inside two to three days.

On paddocks with light covers, the paddocks are larger in size as the cattle need a greater grazing area to meet demand. Strip grazing and on/off grazing are other grazing measures that are being used on the programme farms.

Regardless of which method is being used, the farms are following two simple

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grazing principles:

- Moving cattle onto the next paddock or grazing area after three days to protect grass re-growth from being eaten or damaged through trampling.
- Spreading fertilizer (27

units to 46 units/acre) or slurry (2,500 gallons/acre) as soon as a paddock has been grazed off to drive re-growth.

Blackleg

Spring calves that are over one month old and autumn calves have been given their first shot of a Blackleg vaccination at turnout.

Grazing low grass covers on exposed soils increases the risk of young cattle developing an outbreak of Blackleg.

Older store animals are also given their booster shot prior to turnout.

Multi-purpose clostridial

vaccines are used to prevent Blackleg.

Cattle weighing

Cattle are being weighed as the winter feeding period comes to an end. Weighing cattle is a common management practice on all the farms. The target for store cattle going back to grass is to have gained 0.5kg to 0.6kg/day over the winter so that they best avail of compensatory growth at grass.

Meal has been removed from the diet of yearling cattle in advance of turnout as this reduces the effect of a change in diet.



ON THE GROUND MARK MAXWELL

“Gross margin per hectare has increased by 38% on farm from 2011 to 2013”

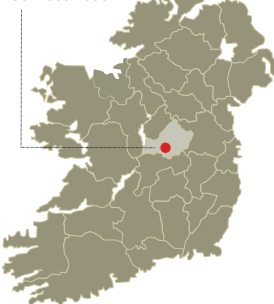
The BETTER farm programme has always focused on improving herd output by increasing stocking rate and producing more calves annually through improved cow fertility. Over the past two weeks, we have outlined the importance of grazed grass in any suckler to beef system.

There is no point in increasing stock numbers if the farm has to rely on using increased volumes of concentrates. Instead, the BETTER farms have invested in improving grassland so that they can carry the additional stock numbers.

Grass is the cheapest feed source on Irish livestock farms and it is the most abundant. Farmers comment on the importance of making high-quality silage, yet often ignore the quality of grazing swards.

Last week, the third early grazing farmwalk was held on Mark Maxwell's farm at Ballynagore, Co Westmeath. The event demonstrated

Ballynagore,
Co Westmeath



how early closing of grazing ground in autumn and spreading of early fertilizer, especially on reseeded swards, can facilitate getting cattle out to grass in early March.

Farm details

Mark farms 107ha (264 acres) of land which is split into three blocks. The farm is mostly grassland except for 12ha (30 acres) of tillage. Mark runs 90 suckler cows with progeny taken through to beef. Cows are split evenly between spring and autumn-calving and served predomi-

nantly by Charolais sires via AI or through a stock bull.

Mark outlined how he is focused on sourcing and breeding cows with strong maternal traits. The replacement policy has relied heavily on sourcing Hereford cross heifers from local dairy herds with known health status.

These heifers are being crossed with easy-calving, maternal Simmental or Limousin bulls, such as Hauteclair (HCA) and Curaheen Apostle (APZ). Mark wants a functional fertile cow that can produce high yields of milk at grass as well as gain body condition.

Increasing output

Since joining the programme, Mark has recorded a steady increase in output and gross margin per hectare. Table 1 outlines the physical and financial performance of the herd from 2011 to 2013 with the targets for 2015 outlined.

Gross margin per hectare has increased by 38% on farm from 2011 to 2013.



The rise is partly due to an increase in beef price as well as producing more kilos of liveweight from the same area of ground.

In 2013, the farm slaughtered 44 steers and 44 heifers with carcass weights averaging 420kg and 360kg, respectively.

Mark has carried some male cattle as bulls in 2013 as a trial, but he feels that bull beef is not a viable option for his system, given the additional meal required and grazing restrictions placed on animals.

Variable costs have been controlled, despite Mark investing in a reseeded programme. Reduced concentrate use has seen the meal costs reduce from €160/ha in 2011 to €114/ha in 2013.

Even with the cold spring of 2013, the farm managed to keep control of variable costs despite using all fodder reserves.

Soil fertility is good, with the farm having 79% of soils at index 4 for phosphate. Potash (K) levels are lower with 82% of the farm at index 2.

The fertilizer plan is targeting slurry to the soils that are deficient in potash and the farm is topping up with CAN on grazing ground to avoid the risk of Tetany. Figures 1 and 2 outline the P and K index on the farm.

Soil pH is high, with the farm ranging from 6.49 to 7.23. With such a high pH, the farm has a molybdenum problem and livestock are supplemented with copper boluses.

Herd expansion

Working closely with programme adviser Alan Dillon and local adviser Paul Gibney, the farm has plans to increase the herd to 120 cows calving annually, with Mark seeing potential to grow the August/September autumn-calving herd rather than the spring herd.

Although autumn-calving can initially add expense to the system by supplementing the lactating cow during the winter, Mark outlined how he has the potential to kill these steers and heifers off grass at the end of their second grazing season without the need to re-house them.

The future of the farm is to finish all males as steers with a focus of gaining a minimum of 200kg live-



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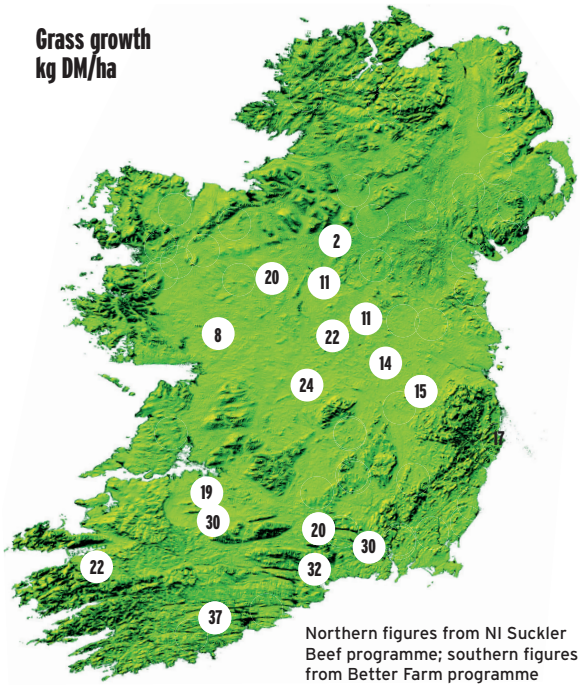
WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Average grass growth this week was 20kg DM/ha.
- ➔ Grass re-growth is variable, depending on how productive grazing swards are.
- ➔ Reseeds and swards with high levels of perennial ryegrass are most responsive to fertilizer after grazing.
- ➔ Fertilizer is being applied

- at 27 to 46 units of bagged nitrogen or 2,500 gallons/acre of slurry after grazing.
- ➔ Young stock have been given the first shot of vaccine to prevent Blackleg.
- ➔ Cattle are being weighed prior to turnout to monitor winter performance.
- ➔ Weighing will also allow a comparison on weight gain at grass over the year.

➔ Where cattle are grazing during wet spells, split the paddocks into daily grass allocations to minimise sward damage. As there will be plenty of moisture in the grass, there is no need to provide access to drinking troughs in every day paddock during this period.

TOP TIP



Spring 2013 heifers have been turned out to grass since 8 March on Mark Maxwell's farm at a liveweight range of 300kg to 400kg.

weight from grass alone in the animals second grazing season.

Weight gain from grass
Last year, spring-born steers were turned out to grass on 20 February. From turnout until June, these animals gained 1.8kg liveweight/day from a grass-only diet. From June to September, the same group gained 1.1kg/day from a grass-only diet, which demonstrates the value of high quality grassland management in supporting excellent levels of cattle performance. This year, Mark turned 14 spring and autumn-born steers and bulls out to grass on 8 March at an average weight of 520kg liveweight. These cattle are the last of

the males to be slaughtered from cattle born in 2012. The farm is understocked and with the reseeding programme providing more grass growth early in the season, it now has the capacity to graze and finish these animals at grass in June. At a grazing cost of €0.05/kg DM of grass and the stated weight gain for Mark's herd, a 520kg steer grazing in the spring would have a cost of €0.27/kg liveweight gain. Compare this to the same 520kg steer on 20kg of silage (€30/t) and 5kg of concentrates (€260/t), there is a daily cost saving of €1.63 by getting these cattle out to grass.

Spring grazing
In 2013, the farm grew 9.6t of grass dry matter per hectare. Mark measures grass weekly and matches grass growth to stock demand. As he has his own round baler and wrapper, he removes grass that is too strong for grazing. Having paddocks closed from October meant that the farm now has adequate grass supplies for early-season grazing. Cattle are being turned out in accordance with the farm's spring rotation planner. This prevents Mark from running out of grass too soon. The target turnout date was 1 March, but this was delayed by one week due to weather and ground conditions. The plan is to start the second rotation by 20 April. The farm has a six-week rotation in the first grazing. Spring rotation targets are outlined in Table 2. To achieve these targets, the farm takes a flexible approach to managing early grass.



A crowd of 500 people attended the early grazing farmwalk at Mark Maxwell's farm. The farm aims to achieve a minimum of 200kg of liveweight gain from grass each year.

Figure 1
P index of farm

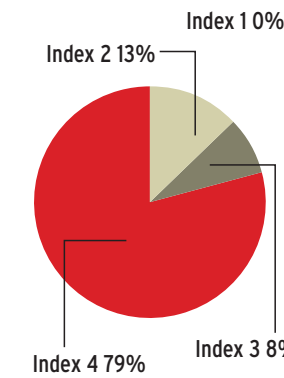


Figure 2
K index of farm

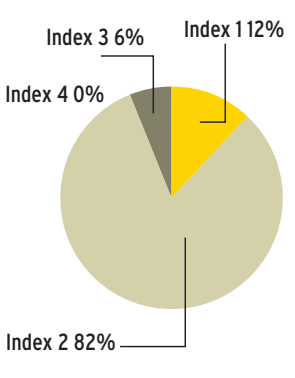


Table 1: Physical and financial performance on farm

	2011	2012	2013	2015 (est)
Stocking rate (LU/ha)	1.47	1.57	1.68	2.11
Kg LW/ha	462	504	510	763
Gross output (€/ha)	866	1108	1138	1633
Variable costs (€/ha)	387	477	476	580
Gross margin (€/ha)	479	630	662	1053

Table 2: Spring rotation targets

Total hectares to be grazed	94ha
Graze 40% by 27 March	37ha
Graze 70% by 10 April	66ha
Graze 100% by 20 April	94ha

FARMER FOCUS

Heinz Eggert
Co Kildare

Calving is going well here on Shepland's Farm. I have 29 cows left to calve out of 106. Calving started on 7 February and will, hopefully, be finished by mid-April as the bull was taken away from the cows on 8 July last year. All of my replacement heifers calve at two years of age and this is my second year putting them to my easy-calving Hereford stock bull. To date, I have had four losses of which two died at birth and two from viral pneumonia. I have 24 suitable replacement heifers to go to the Hereford bull this year. I will re-assess them by weighing, doing a pre-breeding fertility scan and measuring their pelvis widths when I vaccinate them for Lepto and BVD. I also fertility tested my stock bulls last month and they are ready for the upcoming breeding season. I hope to get my first calves with their calves out to grass this week. They are getting priority as they are still growing while trying to rear a

calf and recover to go back in calf. I turned my yearling bulls out to grass on 10 March and they weighed 420kg. They weighed 345kg at housing (27 November) and were fed first cut silage and 3kg of concentrates initially, which was stepped down to 1kg and they were off concentrates by four weeks before turn-out. The heifers went to grass on 15 March and weighed 378kg. They weighed 300kg at housing and were fed silage and 2kg of concentrates. Overall, I was pleased with the weanling's performance this winter. My farm grass cover is on target at 903kg DM/ha. However, ground conditions are still wet after the rain. To date, I have 40% of the grazing ground grazed off. I hope to start grazing my silage ground this week. I spread one bag of CAN/acre on my grazed paddocks to help re-growth for the second rotation.



Patrick Drohan
Co Waterford

Spring has been busy here in Kilmacthomas. I had more cows to calve this year as I am trying to increase my stocking rate. Shed space was a little tight at times but I managed to move cattle around to make extra space and by getting some of the yearling bullocks out to grass. Thankfully, we only have nine cows left to calve and I have 41 calves on the ground. Calving started in late January and, as I am trying to get my calving tightened up, I hope to finish by the end of April. Overall, the calving has gone well with only two losses to date. I had an issue with cryptosporidium in some of the earlier born calves. I managed to get my replacement heifers for bulling this year and 25 cows with their calves out to grass during the dry spell last week to help free up housing space. Cows are being strip grazed to slow down the rotation as grass covers on the home farm are a little low. I will put up a back fence when they get to the next section of the field as the calves will have shelter there. I have good covers of

grass on the land where the bullocks are grazing. Hopefully, some of my heifers will get out later this week. I weighed my bullocks and heifers on 14 February and they weighed 403kg and 361 kg, respectively. They grew at 0.87kg and 0.76 kg/day during the winter housing period on first-cut grass silage and 2kg of concentrate from December to mid-January. Meal was cut to 0.5kg from then until turnout. I spread a bag of urea/acre on most of my land on 10 March and 1.5 bags of CAN/acre on my reseed and some paddocks on my out farm. Slurry will be spread once paddocks are grazed off. I also purchased a new Limousin stock bull to run with my replacement heifers and suitable cows. He is a five-star bull and a grandson of Willodge Vantastic.

