

BETTERfarm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Rainfall making grass management difficult



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Hheavy rainfall over the past weekend has made ground conditions more difficult to manage on the majority of the programme farms.

Cattle remain at grass but

the farmers are moving them onto the next paddock earlier than planned to prevent ground damage.

Moving cattle off a paddock before it has been cleaned out is leaving a higher residual cover, but as cattle are moving around their rotation quicker than normal, these covers will be grazed off in the next rotation before they get too far ahead.

While cleaning out covers is usually a priority, during periods of heavy rainfall, the priority changes to preventing sward damage and poaching. A heavily poached sward

will be slow to recover and grass growth will suffer.

Moving cattle early is paramount to preventing damage. As cattle graze a cover down, they can become unsettled, as there is less grass available and the sward can become heavily soiled after a few days during a wet period.

It is important that animals are moved before they

start to get restless to prevent cattle poaching along boundaries and dividing wire.

If moved in time, the programme farms have found that swards that appear soiled will quickly recover as any damage is mostly superficial. Some farms grazing yearling bulls have offered some concentrates to keep bulls settled over the

weekend.

Rather than feeding in a trough, meal was simply offered on top of the sward to prevent heavy cattle congregating around a trough and causing damage.

While rainfall is causing management problems, there is more settled, warmer weather forecast. With soil moisture having been replen-

ished, grass growth rates should increase again over the coming weeks, provided temperatures hold up and fertilizer can be applied.

Silage swards are coming close to harvesting, with some farmers debating on whether to start cutting this weekend if settled weather materialises.

➔ Heavy rainfall has made

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 GER DINEEN

“All 50 cows and heifers calved over a six-week period, which is a fantastic achievement for a suckler herd using 100% AI”



Cows and calves are separated through a creep gate that Ger Dineen made on a farm roadway. Separating cows and calves has had a positive effect on getting cows back in heat quickly for inseminating.



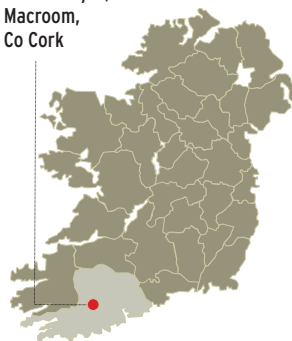
ALAN DILLON
PROGRAMME ADVISER

With farmers looking to increase milk yield in their suckler cows, many are looking at purchasing suitable heifers from the dairy herd to breed milky replacements.

For certain regions of the country where there is greater access to dairying stock, this replacement strategy can work well to help reduce the costs associated with heifer rearing.

However, if replacement heifers are sourced from dairy herds consisting predominantly of Holstein breeding, milk yield will be increased but often at the expense of cow conformation

Kilnamartyra,
Macroon,
Co Cork



and the quality of progeny produced.

BETTER Farm programme participant Ger Dineen has expanded his herd to 50 cows calving down this spring, from 35 cows when he joined the programme in 2012.

Ger farms 32ha (79 acres) of grassland in Kilnamartyra, Macroon, Co Cork.

All male stock are finished as bulls under 16 months of age, while the heifers are retained as replacement stock for the herd or sold directly off farm as breeding stock at 12 months.

Along with working to a farm plan as part of the BETTER Farm programme, Ger works closely with his local B&B adviser Michael Bourke on best practice for his farm throughout the year.

Breeding

Ger is a firm believer in using maternal sires for breeding the entire herd, which consists mainly of Simmental cross cows, although there is a small influence of Limousin genetics in the herd also.

Unlike most spring calving suckler herds, all cows are bred to artificial insemination, which Ger carries out himself and consistently achieves conception rates of 80% to 90%.

The result of the herd breeding policy is clearly evident when looking at the cows.

Cows are extremely milky and, considering that cows are inseminated during the grazing season, cow fertil-

ity is good with a 374-day calving interval in 2013/2014 compared with the national average of 395 days.

This spring, Ger achieved one calf per cow with no mortality recorded.

Replacement heifers are selected from the milkiest cows in the herd.

Weighing calves at regular intervals throughout the year identifies the best yielding cows in the herd, providing a sound basis when selecting potential replacements.

Replacements are selected from cows that calve down in the first half of the calving spread.

Early calving cows will be the most fertile females in the herd and, as fertility is a highly heritable trait, they are the most suitable cows to breed replacements from.

Heifers that are not suitable for breeding within the herd or suitable to sell as a potential breeding animal are finished at 16 months of age.

Compact calving is also a common feature of herd management.

All 50 cows and heifers calved over a six-week period in 2014, which is a fantastic achievement for a suckler herd using 100% AI during the grazing season. Ger attributes the breeding success to two factors on the farm:

- ➔ Cow nutrition.
- ➔ Breaking the cow and calf bond.

Cow nutrition

As the breeding season is carried out at grass, Ger is focused on good grassland management to ensure top quality grazing is available

to stock at all times.

Grass is measured weekly by walking paddocks and recorded on the Pasturebase programme.

Reseeding is an annual practice and compound N, P, and K fertilizers, such as 10-10-20 and 18-6-12, are used in accordance with soil test results to build soil fertility.

Reseeded pastures have shown their value this spring with growth rates of up to 100kg DM/ha/day from new swards, whereas older swards consistently produce between 30kg and 40kg DM/ha/day.

Turnout is almost immediately after calving, as soon as weather conditions permit.

For this reason, calving season now begins around two weeks later than last year. Calving started on 1 February this spring.



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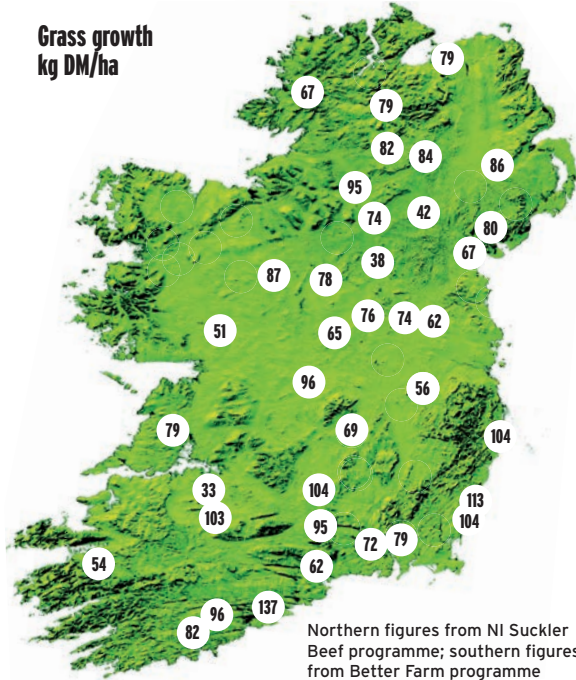
WEEK IN REVIEW

- ground conditions more difficult to manage.
- ➔ Cattle are being moved quickly onto the next paddock to prevent sward damage.
- ➔ Where higher residual covers are left in paddocks, they will be cleaned out in the next rotation.
- ➔ Meal has been offered to yearling bulls to keep them settled during spells of heavy rainfall.
- ➔ Silage is coming close to harvesting, with some farms planning to start in the next week.

➔ When mowing silage with your own equipment, it is always best to cut grass in the afternoon as sugars are at their highest. Sugars help to ferment and preserve silage. Grass should also be lifted in the afternoon around 24 hours after mowing to increase dry matter.

TOP TIP

Grass growth kg DM/ha



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

Breaking cow-calf bond

Separating cows and calves around 20 days before the breeding season is due to begin has had a positive effect on cow fertility.

Calves are separated and only allowed to suck the cow twice daily. Calves will only have access to cows twice daily for a period of 30 days.

This task seems almost impossible to achieve at grass for many suckler farmers but Ger has developed a simple solution.

He has manufactured a creep-type system on his farm roadway, where cows are gathered for inseminating daily during the breeding season.

From the roadway, cows and calves can be quickly split into two separate paddocks, with calves going one way and cows another. Cows and calves are quickly trained to the system within days.

When cows are herded onto the roadway to bring in for inseminating, the creep gate is opened, allowing calves back to suck the cow.

Once they have finished, Ger herds the calves back through the creep gate to their grass paddock.

Any cows that are in heat are brought in to AI at this stage, while the rest of the cows move to fresh grass. Scratch cards and tail painting are also used as heat detection.

Ger explains: "It is a simple, low-cost system. If it was not this easy, I would not do it."

Growth rates

Cattle consistently achieve high growth rates. Bull calves averaged 1.45kg/day

Table 1: Gross Margins on under 16-month bulls in Ger Dineen's herd

Average age - 13.8 months		Cost/head
Silage & straw costs during finishing period		€57
Veterinary		€25
Meal		
Weaning to housing mid-November	60kg/head	
Housing (silage & 4.5kg to mid-January)	270kg/head	
Ad-lib build up for 20 days	140kg/head	
Ad-lib 5 February to 8 March	750kg/head	
Total meal fed	1.22t @ €260/t	€317
Total variable costs		€399
Avg value of calf at weaning	360kg @ €2.25/kg	€810
Avg carcase value (paid in grid & QAS bonus)		€1,757
Margin over selling as weanling		€548

to weaning at 200 days of age with no meal fed, while heifers averaged 1.31kg/day over the same period. This equates to a 360kg calf produced purely from milk and grass.

While the high growth rates are very impressive, there is a slight downside in that cow size is hard to control. Cows are typically 800kg+ despite all heifers calving at 24 months of age.

To counteract this, Ger has altered the breeding plans. In 2013, he crossed all heifers with a Salers bull to introduce a third breed into the herd. This year, Ger is using some Angus straws to try to reduce cow size.

By reducing cow size to around 650kg liveweight, Ger should have a more efficient animal that will have a lower maintenance requirement.

With land type ranging from dry, free-draining to heavier peat-type soils, compaction can be an issue in wet years. Therefore, a lighter cow will suit land type better.

Bull beef

All male animals are slaughtered under 16 months and 2014 showed up some very impressive results.

The first lot of 13 bulls were slaughtered on 8 March at an average age of 13.8 months. Average carcase weight was 413kg with 11 U grades and two E grades. Fat scores were adequate in all cases.

Average kill-out was 56.3%, with Simmentals typically killing out at 55% to 56% and Limousin killing out at 58% to 60%.

Taking an average finished liveweight of 733kg, average liveweight gain since birth was 1.65kg/day, assuming a 50kg birth weight.

Some Simmental bulls gained up to 2.5kg/day in the final finishing period, as outlined in Table 1. The table excludes fixed costs and labour.

Having bulls slaughtered at such a young age with high daily carcase gain meant that there was a margin in finishing the bulls on the farm.

Future plans

Ger's future plans involve maintaining cow numbers at the current level of 50, while striving to improve the genetic merit of the herd. The current system of finishing young bulls will continue so long as they are paid on the QPS grid and are eligible for the QAS bonus.

Ger has also built up a local customer base for his replacement heifer sales. These heifers receive a premium price and a testament to their quality is the amount of repeat business generated from local farmers.

Continually increasing soil fertility and reseedling will enable the farm to comfortably carry the higher stocking rate with increased grass growth early and late in the season.

FARMER FOCUS

Cathal Crean Wexford

The wet start to this spring delayed getting cattle out to grass, but thankfully grass growth is now in full swing. Ground conditions are in good shape despite the rain over last weekend.

I started letting my early calving cows out to grass at the beginning of April. Their calves had access to paddocks via a creep gate in the shed from early March.

I find this a great way to get calves out of the shed and into fresh air. I let the last cows and calves plus yearling heifers out on 14 April.

I turned the bulls out to grass on 10 March and divided them into two groups based on their liveweight. However, I did rehouse the heavier group for roughly 10 days when the weather turned wet in late March.

As a result of the turn-out and with soft ground conditions, I could not graze off my silage



ground or spread slurry on it.

I made a call to close it up for silage and dressed it with two bags of 10:10:20, 2.5 bags of CAN and a bag of muriate of potash on 7 April. I hope to harvest silage around 25 May.

I have the three wettest paddocks left to graze on my second rotation, so with the good weather forecast this week, it will provide a good opportunity to graze them out tight.

For the first fertilizer dressing on grazing land, I spread 1.5 bags of 10:10:20 on paddocks with low phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) and one bag of CAN on fields with good P and K levels in early March.

I spread a bag of CAN after the first rotation during Easter. I reseeded a three-acre paddock last week. I sprayed it with glyphosate and Dursban 4 to prevent frit fly attack.

I ploughed, tilled and sowed it with the one-pass drill. It received 1.5t of ground limestone and two bags of 10:10:20. I will spray it with a post-emergence herbicide in six weeks' time.

Richard Williamson Co Meath

The calving season this spring went a lot better than last year, with very few calving difficulties. Thankfully, I have 85 calves from 86 calved cows.

I have three cows left to calve but the majority of the calving finished last month. I treated all calves daily with Halicur as a preventative to cryptosporidium while housed.

Despite the wet spring, I was able to get cows out to grass soon after calving. I started calving in late February and, as I am tight on accommodation space for cows, getting them out straight away was a great help.

I put the bull in with the cows on 10 May and each bull has approximately 45 cows. Recently, I had two calves from the older group of calves that got very sick with coccidiosis. I treated them with Vecoxan and antibiotics and, as a preventive, I dosed the remainder of the calves in that group with Vecoxan. I



am keeping a watchful eye on the other calf groups.

Grass is growing very well at 74kg DM/ha/day. I have 12 days of grazing ahead of my bulls and may have to remove surplus grass from the cows in order to maintain sward quality.

I closed up silage ground on 10 April. It was grazed out and dressed with four bags of 18:6:12, as levels of phosphorus and potassium on the farm are low. I spread 1.75 bags of 18:6:12 on the paddocks in late March when ground conditions improved and followed up the cows paddocks with a bag of CAN per acre after their first rotation.

I spread slurry on the lighter-covered paddocks in late January. On 21 February, my 2013 spring-born bulls weighed 393kg and gained 0.71kg/day over the winter and the heifers weighed 359kg.

Due to market changes, I am castrating my Angus yearling bulls. I have vaccinated them against tetanus (clostridial diseases) and plan on surgically castrating them with my vet in the coming days. I plan on slaughtering them between 22 and 24 months of age.