

BETTERfarm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Breeding progressing well in spring herds



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The breeding season is progressing well on the programme farms. Stock bulls have been running with cows on a number of farms since early May. This will see spring calving commence in early February

next year in line with a late February to early March turnout date.

Some of the programme farmers like to calve their heifers ahead of the main cow herd to give them extra attention, whereas some prefer to calve the whole herd together. The choice comes down to the farmer's preference and experience from previous years.

Regardless of which option, the main objective is to get heifers to the correct service weight of 60% to 65% of mature cow by 15 months of age. Once settled in-calf, the next target is to get these heifers to approximately 90%

of mature cow weight by the time they calve down.

If these targets are reached, the heifers are better developed and capable of coping with the demands of calving, rearing the calf and coming back into heat again. So far, the farmers report the good grazing conditions from mid-March to early May as being hugely beneficial in getting replacement heifers

out to grass so that they meet their target breeding weights. In many cases, the heifers are weighing heavier than their target service weight, which is mostly around 400kg to 420kg.

On some farms, there is an issue with mineral supplementation. Cows have been given a multivitamin bolus and minerals have been supplied in drinking water

where soils are traditionally low in copper, iodine and selenium.

As grass growth is running well ahead of livestock demand, cows have been kept on a steady diet. Grass quality is also good, which is having a positive effect on dry matter energy intake, despite the return of heavy rainfall recently. Cows are showing strong heats with some farm-

ers having cows coming back into heat as quickly as four weeks post-calving. Stock bulls will run with the cows for 10 to 12 weeks, depending on how tight the calving interval currently is. After this time, the bulls will be removed. Cows will be scanned in mid- to late-summer to coincide with other management tasks when cattle have to be herded together.

Table 1: Converting growth rate into kilograms 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.

Considerations for reseeding

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Throughout the BETTER Farm programme, the importance of increasing output has been well documented on these pages. More important is increasing output from grass.

While the farms are continually addressing soil fertility, being able to grow more grass from the same land area to graze and produce silage for additional cattle is a challenge.

Old swards with low levels of ryegrass will not be capable of sustaining a higher stocking rate. Older swards tend to have more natural grasses present and they are just not capable of using nitrogen to the same extent as perennial ryegrass.

However, an older sward that has been well managed can still possess a lot of ryegrass. Regularly liming ground, applying P and K and grazing tight or topping when needed to prevent the build-up of dead grass will encourage further tillering of ryegrass and reduce the amount of natural grass present. These swards will be better equipped to support a

higher stocking rate.

Where ryegrass content is low, then the field needs to be reseeded. The farms involved in the BETTER Farm programme have all undertaken a reseeding programme.

Approximately 10% of swards have been targeted annually to be reseeded, although this can vary depending on the weather, finances and the demand for grass.

With grass growth now running well ahead of livestock demand, there will be a situation arising where a grass surplus will be building.

For some of the farms, this provides an opportunity to take out extra silage. For others, it offers an ideal opportunity to close off some older, unproductive swards for reseeding.

When selecting fields for reseeding, there are a number of considerations to be made first:

- Soil analysis – does the sward need lime, P and K?
- Expense – reseeding can be expensive, so cashflow can be affected.
- Grass varieties – is it a cutting or grazing only sward or combination of both?
- Method – min-tilling is quick, whereas ploughing improves drainage and

levels ground but may make ground too soft for grazing.

- Which field to reseed – do certain fields need draining or is it a dry field needed for grazing during a wet spell?
- When to reseed – spring, summer or autumn?

When to reseed

When do you need to reseed a field is a question commonly asked of the BETTER Farm participants and advisers at open days.

Every field can produce an ideal sward cover if left ungrazed for a period of time and well fertilized.

The answer depends on how soon the field can be grazed again after stock have been moved off it.

Assuming that the sward is grazed tight to 4cm (300kg DM/ha) and dressed with 13 to 27 units of nitrogen throughout the year, it should be ready for grazing again in 14 to 21 days from late spring to late summer in reasonable growing conditions.

If the sward is struggling to grow a cover of grass with an average height of 10cm to 12cm (1,600kg to 2,000kg DM/ha) with a dressing of up to one bag per acre of CAN, then it should be marked for reseeding.



By walking the grazing ground on a weekly basis, the programme farmers can quickly identify the poor performing swards on their farm.

Most of the farmers are trying to work off a three-day grazing paddock system and keep to a grazing rotation of 21 days.

The reason for sticking to the three-day paddocks is that grass will start to re-shoot after three days.

Therefore, holding cattle on a paddock for longer than this length of time means there is a danger of cattle eating off the regrowth and reducing grass yield.

The paddocks will consistently struggle to produce enough grass to carry livestock. This is an indication

of poor management rather than poor grassland performance.

Reseeding in spring will require a post-emergence spray for weeds. In summer and autumn, there will still be weeds established in a reseed but they are often less vigorous at these stages of the year.

Soil fertility

Ideally, there should be a soil analysis taken before reseeding to determine lime, P and K status.

With permanent grass swards that have received regular applications of chemical fertilizer, there will be a tendency for the soil to be naturally acidic.

The more acidic the soil, the greater the likelihood of

a poor reseed establishing.

Low pH (5.5 to 5.7) will hinder clover development and will lock up soil nutrients. Applying lime after ploughing is beneficial to encourage seed establishment.

If the sward is being burned off and grass seed is being directly drilled into the soil, lime is again beneficial as the decaying grass can become acidic.

When reseeding, most of the BETTER farms are applying 10:10:20 to encourage seed establishment. Depending on soil analysis, the rate of application will vary but, at index 2, most farmers will apply two bags per acre to the seed bed.

Phosphate will encourage root development, helping the seed to establish, while



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WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Grass growth averaged 78kg DM/ha/day this week.
- ➔ Breeding is progressing well on the farms, with few issues being reported.
- ➔ Good grazing conditions have helped to bring cows into heat quickly.
- ➔ Getting replacement heifers out to grass from mid-March has meant that heifers have reached their target service date with little trouble.
- ➔ Mineral supplementation is being provided where soils are low in trace elements.
- ➔ Stock bulls will be removed from cows after 10 to 12 weeks.

➔ Grass will be starting to head out in swards, so topping will be required. Topping before cattle are moved out of the paddock can be a good idea to get cattle to clean up all grass.

TOP TIP

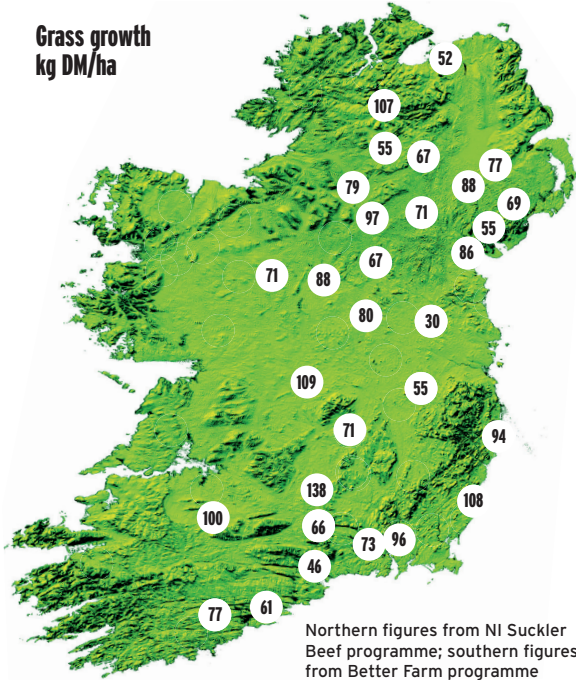


Table 1: Typical cost of reseeding

	Plough	Min-tilling
Lime (1 tonne)	€25	€25
Glyphosphate	€12	€12
Ploughing & Harrow	€80	
Sowing / Stitching	€30	€35
Grass Seed	€70	€70
Herbicide	€12	€12
Fertiliser (Two bags 10:10:20 @ €450)	€45	€45
Roll	€10	€10
Total cost / acre	€284	€209

In a crop rotation with a short grass ley, this is less of an issue, as the soil is regularly ploughed.

Min-tilling

To avoid ploughing down fertile soil and in order to bring the field back into production quicker, a number of the BETTER Farm participants have opted to use minimum cultivation techniques.

The process involves burning off the existing sward with glyphosate and leaving for approximately 10 days.

Then the new grass seed is direct drilled into the existing seedbed. Grazing off the dead grass is a benefit, as is applying lime beforehand.

The success depends on the degree of soil contact. Some machines will stitch in grass seed and can have varying degrees of success.

The farmers who used the grass drill had greater success as the seed was firmly placed in the soil at the correct depth. Slug pellets were also used.

Min-tilling was cheaper to carry out than conventional reseeding by €70 to €80, depending on contractor charges. As the soil surface was not disturbed, the farmers who used min-tilling to

reseed last year were able to start grazing sooner, with some grazing the swards with light stock six weeks after drilling grass seed.

Getting stock on to graze again is crucial to keep the old grass from regenerating. The programme farmers have been using weanlings or sheep to manage reseeded swards. Lighter stock have grazed for a short period to encourage plant tillering.

Whichever method is used, the programme farmers have benefitted enormously from reseeded grassland.

The greatest benefit has been realised early and late in the year when older swards see production fall off sharply.

It is these younger swards that have allowed the programme farmers to carry increased stocking levels and achieve higher weight gains from grass.

Spreading the costs outlined in Table 1 over 10 years makes reseeding cheap, relative to spreading more fertilizer and improved performance.

At €21 to €28/acre over 10 years, it costs approximately 10kg to 12kg of liveweight gain, which young grass will more than deliver.

FARMER FOCUS

James Madigan Kilkenny

Grass growth is flying on the farm. Last week, growth averaged 73kg DM ha/day and my demand is 44kg DM ha/day.

My farm is currently stocked at 2,189kg liveweight/ha (3.09 LU/ha) and my farm cover is 1,078kg DM/ha. Having consulted with my Teagasc and programme adviser, I am removing the three strongest paddocks as baled silage.

By removing the three paddocks, I will reduce my grazing days ahead from 25 to 14. I cut six acres of silage ground last week and it yielded well with 13.6 bales per acre. The rest of my first cut (37 acres) will be cut as soon as the weather settles again.

I will not cut these fields again for second cut. Instead, I will rotate them with other fields. I spread 2,500 gallons/acre of slurry on all my silage ground in late January/early February and spread 2.5 bags/acre of 10:10:20 and 2.5 bags/acre of Super Net (CAN + sulphur) on 20 April.

On my grazing ground, I spread 2.5 bags/acre of 10:10:20 in March and followed it up with 1.5 bags/acre of Super Net after that grazing. My spring calving cows and calves are doing fine, although the calves had a small setback earlier in the spring with pneumonia and cryptosporidium.

I let the bull in on 23 March and will take him out on 1 July to maintain my compact calving. I weaned seven autumn cows that I had earmarked for culling and will wean the remainder around 10 June.

I weighed their calves before going to grass on 22 March and the bullocks weighed 290kg and heifers 237kg. They are thriving well and will be weighed again before weaning. I weighed my 2012 autumn-calved beef heifers last Saturday and they averaged 553kg. They are

grazing good quality grass and will be fed 2kg to 3kg of meal for six weeks to get fat cover on them for finishing. My autumn 2012 bullocks weighed 531kg on 1 March and are on target for finishing later this year.



Patrick Grennan Wexford

I started killing my under 16-month-old bulls over the past month. To date, I have seven bulls killed. I drafted them out from my main batch of bulls and fed them more intensively in order to have adequate fat cover on them when they were around 700kg liveweight.

On average, these bulls have killed out at 402kg carcass weight and their fat covers have ranged between 2= to 4-. Although age limit was not an issue for these bulls, they had very high growth potential, so trying to get them to adequate fat covers while staying within the carcass weight limit proved difficult.

You really have to monitor their liveweight regularly to make sure they do not go over the 420kg carcass limit.

I will have more bulls fit for slaughter in the next two weeks as they are coming close to 16 months.

My bulls have been on approxi-

mately 10kg of a high-energy finishing ration with baled silage since early March. My stock bull is with the cows since 20 April.

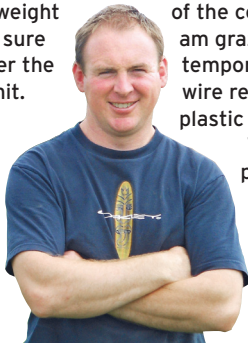
I am running two Limousin stock bulls. A Mas du Clo bull is for mature cows and an On-Dit bull is to breed replacements and to use on heifers.

I selected replacement heifers in February, based on liveweight (400kg+), milk yield of their dam and docility. All cows and calves are grazing on my home farm.

With excellent growth rates and good ground conditions, I am able to run a high stocking rate of 4,058kg liveweight/ha (6.15LU/ha) with livestock demand running at 81kg DM/ha/day.

Average farm cover is 708kg DM/ha. Currently, I have nine days of grass ahead of the cows and calves and I am grazing them in two-day temporary paddocks using wire reels and movable plastic stakes.

This allows me to protect the plant regrowth. All grassland received 40 units of urea in early March and I spread a bag of 27:2.5:5 per acre after each grazing.



Preparing ground for reseeding on David Walsh's farm, Co Tipperary. Ground was limed and harrowed before drilling grass seed.

potash will help with nutrient uptake and mobilisation through the grass seedling.

Ploughing

Conventional reseeding offers more than just a sward of young grass. Ploughing will open up the ground to improve drainage and aeration.

Getting farmyard manure onto the ground will also increase soil organic matter

and increase earthworms, which will further improve soil aeration and drainage. Ground will be levelled where it was poached before.

However, ploughing can leave a reseed more difficult to manage in terms of ground conditions. Ground can be soft if the seedbed was over worked.

If weather conditions turn unfavourable after reseeding, then the field may not be capable of carrying livestock for a lengthy period.

Conventional reseeding is more expensive than minimum tillage methods and there is the added risk of ploughing down good soil and turning up infertile soil where the field is going from permanent (long-term) grass back to permanent grass.