

BETTERfarm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Getting grass quality back on track



KIERAN MAILEY
LIVESTOCK SPECIALIST
kmailey@farmersjournal.ie

After the heavy rainfall in late May, last week's drier weather has improved ground conditions on most of the BETTER Farm programme farms, especially in the northern

and western regions of the country.

Cattle that were housed to prevent damage to waterlogged soils have been returning to grass gradually as conditions permit.

Ground is still marginal on some of the heavier farms, so cattle are being moved on quickly to the next paddock before any real damage occurs. The farmers were quick to take advantage of the improved weather to get silage harvested.

There was also an opportunity to get the grazing rotation back on track. Where

grazing days ahead are running at 18 days or more, paddocks have been taken out and baled or ensiled with the main silage crop.

Grass has also been topped on some farms to get headed-out grass or rejected grass cleaned off.

Paddocks that have been

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topped or cut for silage will be dressed with 20 to 27 units of nitrogen per acre and grazed by priority stock.

Worms

Some of the farmers have been taking faecal samples from young stock to monitor worm burdens.

Samples have also been checked for rumen fluke in autumn weanlings that were on/off grazing over winter and early spring.

Worming programmes depend on the individual farm rather than one approach to cover all farms.

Dosing is based on faecal counts or where a visible problem exists in livestock.

Worming products are being rotated on some farms to prevent any risk of resistance and a more effective worm kill.

Autumn weanlings

The farms that sell autumn-born weanlings over the summer to feedlots for finishing are reporting few issues with cattle.

Bulls remain reasonably settled despite the heavy rainfall in recent weeks.

Grass quality remains

good on the grazing block for these animals and on some farms where there is silage aftermath joining the rotation, meal feeding has been postponed until late June.

Meal will be offered again from six to eight weeks before sale, depending on grass quality and supply.

With cattle rations around €260 per tonne, every kilogramme of meal offered adds 26c to the cost of production. Offering high levels of meal feeding offers little increase in performance in weanlings on high quality ryegrass swards.



ON THE GROUND BILLY GILMORE

“Grass quality on the farm is first class and greatly reduces the costs of autumn calving”

Suckler farmers producing weanlings for sale are reliant on getting maximum weight for age to make their system viable. This weight gain has to be driven by grass, not concentrates.

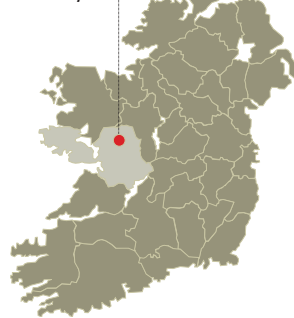
Over the course of the BETTER Farm programme, the profit monitor reports have shown that weanling systems struggle to increase output unless they increase cow numbers.

The biggest cost for any suckler herd is keeping the cow. Cow costs can range depending on system.

Price per kilogramme is important but not as important as getting enough liveweight on the calf to generate a sale value to cover the cost of keeping the cow.

A 300kg calf selling for €2.60/kg has a value of €780, which is unlikely to cover the cost of keeping the cow. A calf at 400kg selling at €2.30/kg has a value of €920 and

Cortoon, Tuam
Co Galway



stands a better chance of leaving a profit margin.

Billy Gilmore operates an autumn calving suckler to weanling system on 47 adjusted hectares (116 acres) in Cortoon, Co Galway. He produces heifer and bull weanlings for live export selling through local markets.

Weanlings are his preferred system as they allow him to keep more cows on his land. He works closely with local Teagasc adviser Gabriel Trayers and programme adviser Catherine Egan.

As there is limited accom-

modation and a very fragmented land base, producing stores or finishing cattle would mean reducing cow numbers or investing in new housing.

Farm details

Billy calved down 42 cows from 2 August 2013 until 12 October with the majority of cows calving inside the first six weeks of a 10-week spread. Herd size has increased to 47 in-calf cows calving down in August 2014.

All cows are bred to AI, which he carries out by himself using Blue and Limousin bulls on smaller cows and Charolais on larger Simmental cows. Cow type is mainly Limousin, Blue and Simmental cross.

Some heifers are kept for replacements but he usually buys maternally-bred heifer weanlings in autumn for breeding.

This option suits Billy as it allows him to concentrate on selecting bulls that breed

fast-growing calves with plenty of conformation to suit the export market.

A total of 26 heifer weanlings were purchased last autumn at an average price of €780, with calves weighing from 280kg to 320kg. Heifers not suitable for breeding this year will be sold live.

Billy has opted for an autumn calving system for a number of reasons: Calving 80% of the herd from early August to mid-September means cows return to grazing after calving without the need for any

concentrate feeding.

Calving in August produces a heavier weanling for sale in July when there is strong demand from live exporters.

It spreads labour as he runs 140 ewes and grows spring cereals.

It reduces grass demand in spring as ewes and cows are not competing for grass.

Cow numbers can be increased as the calf is weaned before turnout.

Increasing output

Since 2009, Billy has gradually expanded his herd. In

a spring calving system, he would have struggled to increase cow numbers to the same extent as the autumn calving system allows.

He has been able to add approximately 1.5 autumn calving cows to the herd for every one spring calving cow that he could have added, based on grazing demand.

Liveweight produced per hectare in 2009 was 398kg/liveweight and typical of many suckler to weanling systems. Output dropped from 615kg liveweight produced per hectare in 2012 to





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WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Drier weather has helped to improve ground conditions on heavier land.
- ➔ First-cut silage has been harvested on a number of farms over the past week.
- ➔ Paddocks have been cut for silage or topped to get grass quality under control.
- ➔ Grazing aftermath is getting 20 to 27 units of nitrogen, once cut.
- ➔ Faecal samples are being used to determine when to dose weanlings.

When dosing cattle for worms, they should be returned to their current grazing paddock for two to three days as they will be shedding high numbers of eggs. They can then be moved to clean pasture. Moving straight to clean pasture after dosing will contaminate this ground.

TOP TIP

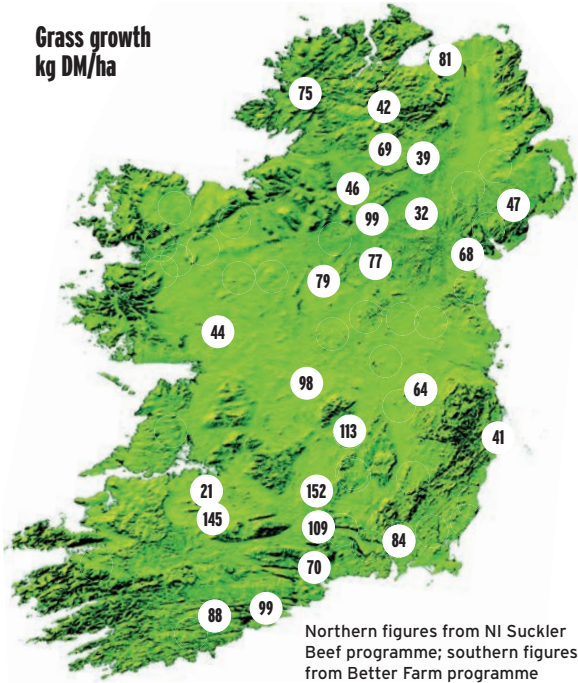


Table 1: Typical feed costs for cows on Billy Gilmore's farm

Feeding period		Feed value
Cow calving 10 August	Grass 14kg DM/day @ 5c/kg	€42
Cow housed 20 October	50kg silage @ €30/t	€173
	1kg barley @ €200/t (70 days)	€14
Weaned 15 February	25kg silage @ €30/t	€33
Turnout 1 April - Calving 10 August	Grass 10kg DM/day @ 5c/kg	€65
Feed costs for cow (exc. land charge, labour & fixed costs)		€329

With Billy mainly calving over August and early September, he does not feed concentrates in his system until cows are housed in mid-October, which is a major cost saving.

At this point, cows are offered 1kg of barley and minerals until the end of the breeding season, which is early January.

The reason he can do this is down to his grassland management. Grass quality on the farm is first class and greatly reduces the costs of autumn calving.

Calved cows are usually grazing on young reseeded swards and on silage aftermath. Surplus grass is taken out over the summer and fed back to lactating cows in winter.

These bales have a feed value of around 72 to 76 DMD and can sustain milk production without concentrates. Barley is only offered to ease the changeover in diet during the breeding season.

Typical feed costs from calving in August are €329. The costs are lower than most autumn calving systems due to utilising high-quality grass and silage throughout winter.

Feeding 2kg/day of concentrates from calving until weaning to supplement average quality silage would add

almost €90 to feeding costs.

Fixed costs still have to be included in this total, along with land charge as the farm is mostly rented. Veterinary fees and replacement costs also have to be added.

Calf management

Once housed, the calf is offered silage and 0.5kg/day of rolled barley until 15 January. At this point, a blend of beet pulp, soya and barley is used to increase growth rate and prepare the calf for weaning in mid-February. The 2kg of meal is offered until turnout around 17 March.

Billy still offers weanlings 1kg of rolled barley throughout the spring.

At present, meal feeding is being reduced in heifers as they are rejecting the meal and preferring to graze fresh grass instead.

Bulls are still consuming meal with ease. Billy prefers to offer the meal as a good method of keeping animals settled during difficult grazing conditions.

Meal will be increased to 2kg/day over July ahead of sale time. With grass quality declining in July, the increased meal will help to keep weanlings performing. Billy feeds no more than 250kg of meal to the weanling in its lifetime, which is

a cost of approximately €60 per head.

Sale

This year, there are 25 bulls for sale in late July to August. Calves were weighed at weaning on 14 February. Bulls averaged 269kg with heifers averaging 249kg and similar to other years.

The target this year is to get all bulls to an average of 450kg liveweight. May has been a difficult month to manage grass on the farm due to persistent heavy rainfall.

Approximately 20% of the main grazing block (45 acres) was flooded for three months this spring which prevented grazing on some of his best swards.

Bulls have to gain 1.3kg liveweight per day from turnout to 1 August to reach the target sale weight, with heifers having to achieve 1.1kg liveweight per day to average 400kg liveweight.

Last year, the bulls averaged 446kg liveweight when sold and realised an average sale value of €1,119/head (€2.51/kg). Heifers averaged 362kg and sold to an average €1,050/head (€2.90/kg).

Billy maintains the weanlings suffered last spring with the lack of grass and weight was down on previous years.

FARMER FOCUS

David Walsh Tipperary

The wet weather has been causing plenty of problems with trying to manage grass on the farm. Cows and calves are relatively settled but yearling stores are far from settled when it is raining.

I housed 20 stores for three days last Monday. They were starting to damage ground when they became unsettled by walking along fencing and hedges.

The stores are grazing on the wetter parts of the farm which were reseeded last year. I was grazing them in day-blocks but they were spoiling grass, so I felt they would be better inside until ground dried up again, which it has done.

The grass should clean up again for the next rotation. I will probably sell some of the strongest bullocks shortly if weather continues to be unsettled. Bullocks weigh from 480kg to 500kg with heifers back at 440kg to 450kg. Fertilizer is being

spread after every grazing at 20 to 25 units per acre, depending on supplies ahead.

Silage is now ready to cut. There are 25 acres to harvest, which I am hoping to get done this week, weather depending. It will be baled as the clamp is still reasonably full from last year.

Silage ground was closed up from 15 April to 25 April as it was grazed off. Slurry was applied and up to three bags of 27:2.5:5 spread per acre. Growth has been excellent and grass has bulked up well for cutting.

I have 48 calves on the ground this year from 52 cows that went to the bull. These are the first calves from my new Limousin stock bulls.

I am delighted with calf quality and they are thriving well. The bulls went out with the cows on 15 April and will be removed on 30 June.

Cows have been breeding well with only a few left to be served. My replacement heifers are bought as calves from a neighbouring dairy farm and due to arrive on farm next week.



Donal Scully Limerick

I harvested 35 acres of first-cut silage on 28 May. It was mowed on 27 May in the afternoon and tedded out the following morning to wilt.

Grass was then rowed up in the evening and ensiled in the pit. It bulked up considerably over the past week to 10 days before cutting. Quality should be excellent.

Slurry will most likely be spread on aftermath this week and half of the ground will be closed up for second cut. First-cut silage got 3,000 gallons/acre of slurry and urea to make up 100 units of nitrogen.

I have been spreading fertilizer after every grazing with pasture sward. From now on, I will go with CAN after each grazing to boost re-growth. There are 18 days of grazing ahead of cattle which is more than I would like.

Weather depending, I will hopefully close up two paddocks next week and

bale them the following week. The grazing block has seen great grass growth lately.

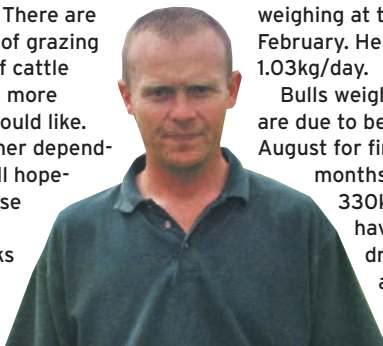
Stocking rate on the grazing block is 4.63 LU/ha at present, with a grazing demand of 74kg DM/ha/day. I have repaired a paddock that was damaged from grazing by surface seeding.

Two paddocks have been marked for reseeding and will be sprayed in the coming week to kill off grass. We had serious rainfall a few weeks ago and cows had to be housed as the land was flooded.

Cows are being used to clean out paddocks after weanlings and doing a good job where ground is dry. They are getting pre-calving minerals and there are 43 cows due to start calving from 20 June.

Weanlings were weighed a fortnight ago. Bulls averaged 1.47kg/day from their last weighing at turnout in late February. Heifers averaged 1.03kg/day.

Bulls weighed 374kg and are due to be housed on 1 August for finishing under 16 months. Heifers weighed 330kg. Weanlings have just been drench for worms and bulls will be treated again at housing.



Grassland management is excellent on farm. Grass that is too strong for grazing is removed as baled silage. These bales have a high nutritional value and are used to feed lactating cows in winter to reduce the need for concentrates.

581kg per hectare in 2013 as a direct result of poor growth in spring 2013.

In comparison, finishing farms in the programme are producing upwards of 900kg to 1,000kg of liveweight per hectare. This shows how weanling systems are limited in output.

Autumn calving

Autumn calving is more expensive than spring calving as the cow is eating more silage and there is a need for supplementing with concentrates.