

# BETTERfarm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

## Closing ground for second cut



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First-cut silage is almost complete on the majority of the programme farms. Farms that had staggered cutting dates or delayed harvesting managed to get grass brought in late

last week before the weather broke over the weekend.

Yields are reportedly excellent on the farms with grass bulking up well over the past fortnight.

Silage is an expensive crop to produce. While quality is the most important factor, the programme farms are trying to tread the line between quality and quantity.

Higher yields spread the contractor charges and reduce the cost per tonne of producing silage.

This makes silage more competitively priced when calculating winter diets and

pricing fodder relative to other feeds.

### Second-cut silage

Ground is now receiving slurry to replace nutrient offtake from first-cut silage. P and K levels remain relatively unchanged in slurry over the growing season.

Nitrogen availability is reduced, however. Slurry applied in June can have the amount of available nitrogen reduced by as much as 50% compared with slurry applied in March.

Where ground is being closed up for second-cut

silage, fertilizer applications will be reduced in comparison to first-cut. Nitrogen limits will be reduced to 80 units on reseeded ground and 65 units on older swards.

Some of the farms will ro-

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tate the silage ground for the second cut.

With strong growth rates being recorded in recent weeks, these farms will close off grazing ground and top up with fertilizer at a rate of 50 to 60 units, depending on the date of the last fertilizer application.

Land used to grow first-cut is then used for grazing and, as cattle are grazing lower covers, grass quality and utilisation are improved.

Worm burdens are also reduced as cattle are grazing cleaner pastures.

Grass management be-

comes easier as there is less chance of grass getting out of control where grazing and silage land are alternated.

### Grazing rotations

Grass growth averaged 71kg DM/ha/day this week. The farms are trying to maintain a grazing rotation between 12 to 18 days to keep on top of grass quality.

With cattle entering fields at lower grass covers, there is better utilisation and less rejected grass. This cuts down on the amount of topping required as cattle can manage to clean out covers tightly.



## ON THE GROUND HEINZ EGGERT

“With a calving period from February to April, the herd is set up to maximise grassland performance”

The lack of demand for bull beef this spring has left many spring-calving suckler herd owners considering a possible change of direction in their farming system.

Finishing bulls under 16 months of age is a specialist system and relies on increased levels of concentrates in spring-calving herds.

Selling weanlings in autumn will reduce herd output as less liveweight is produced per livestock unit. Calving pattern normally needs to be moved to January or February to increase sale weight of weanlings being sold in autumn.

Castrating male calves and taking them through to the forward store stage or to slaughter at 24 months is an option where there is sufficient housing and grazing available without affecting cow numbers.

Heinz Eggert runs a 100-

Sherlockstown,  
Sallins,  
Co Kildare



cow herd on 67ha of grassland at Sallins, Co Kildare, and is currently considering a change in his farming system.

In the past, the strongest bull calves were sold as weanlings in autumn at typical weights of 350kg to 380kg liveweight.

More recently, bull weanlings were sold to finishing units at 12 to 13 months of age. Heifers that are not

retained for breeding are sold for slaughter at 20 to 22 months of age.

However, the usual market outlets for the later-born calves were not in place this spring, which left cattle being sold later than planned. The bulls averaged 501kg on 29 May and have since been sold for export.

Heinz was disappointed with liveweight gain in the bulls this spring as they gained 1.03kg/day since turnout.

Meal was removed from the diet at least one month before turnout in mid-March. Bulls were grazed in one large group of 35 animals, which could have potentially reduced growth rate.

### Output

From the last profit monitor report, the farm was producing 626kg of liveweight per hectare. Gross output was €1,493/ha.

Increasing output under

the current system is proving to be difficult for the farm.

Stocking rate is 1.99LU/ha and approaching its limit, as the farm consists of heavy soils and cattle housing is limited.

Heinz is working closely with local Teagasc adviser Christy Watson and programme adviser Peter Lawrence throughout the year for advice on various management aspects, such as completing a sales budget to compare the best market option for cattle.

Gross margin in 2013 was €436/ha, down from €591/ha the previous year. Variable costs are high on-farm with straw bedding being one of the main costs every year.

With output and gross margin hitting a ceiling under the current system, Heinz is considering a change to produce autumn weanlings or steers.

Both systems have positives and negatives. The deci-

sion will not be made lightly and the BETTER Farm management team is outlining the financial and physical implications of changing system.

All systems outlined have a stocking rate around 2.2LU/ha.

### Weanling system

With a calving period from February to April, the herd is set up to maximise grassland performance in cows by calving at the start of the grazing season.

However, late March- and April-born calves are too light for sale in autumn. Bull calves weighed 344kg on 27 November last year.

Calves were gaining 1.47kg/day on the cow but weight gain was reduced to 0.98kg/day during weaning.

Based on MartWatch figures from the *Irish Farmers Journal*, the average price for the top third of bull weanlings was €2.42/kg for the

same week as the weanlings were weighed.

Selling all bull calves at this stage would have realised an average sale value of €832/head, which is just below the target sale price outlined.

Keeping variable costs to 40% of output would produce a gross margin of €592/ha. Selling bulls as weanlings is a simple system, but due to the timing of the calving pattern, calves will not be heavy enough to increase output or gross margin.

Moving the calving date forward would increase sale weight but is not an option available to Heinz.

### Light stores

Castrating males and selling as stores in May when demand is strong for grazing cattle is an option available.

With cattle weighing around 350kg by housing in mid-November, storing these cattle over winter at a







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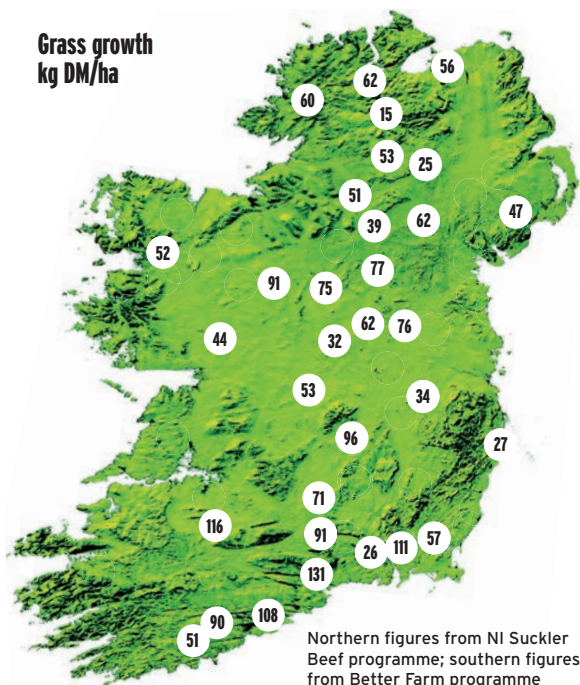
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## **DATES FOR DIARY**

- ➔ **Wednesday 18 June:** BEEF 2014 at Grange. Visit the BETTER Farm village, where the programme advisers and farmers will be available to discuss issues related to grassland management, breeding, animal health and finishing cattle.
- ➔ **Wednesday 9 July:** National BETTER Farm programme open day, hosted by Tom Halpin, Carlanstown, Co Meath. Farm walks start at 2pm and 6pm.
- ➔ **Thursday 24 July:** National BETTER Farm programme open day, hosted by Mike Dillane, Lixnaw, Co Kerry. Farm walks start at 2pm and 6pm.

➔ Weeds such as buttercup are visible in grass swards. Buttercup is a persistent weed and may require two treatments in one season. Make sure to follow product guidelines and do not spray close to water courses.

**TOP TIP**
**Grass growth  
kg DM/ha**


## **FARMER FOCUS**

### **Richard Jennings Co Mayo**

There were 32 acres of silage harvested last week. As the weather was extremely changeable, silage was mowed and ensiled straight away.

I would have liked to get it wilted but there was no opportunity. Grass was ensiled dry so there is relatively little effluent. Yields are excellent as grass bulked up well. There would be over 10t/ac harvested.

This year's yields and having silage left over from last year means that I will not need to close up for second-cut. Instead, I will concentrate on making round bales when there is surplus grass.

This will improve silage quality, as well as grazing quality, for weanlings and lambs. I am going to make some haylage for winter sheep also, as it is a very useful feed for ewes.

I stopped inseminating cows on 6 May and noticed a couple of repeats in late-calving

cows. They will not be served again and have been marked for culling. It depends on the market, but I will probably sell the cows live rather than fatten them.

I have been monitoring cows all spring as I inseminate them and there is at least 80% of the cows in calf. They will be scanned in early August to confirm calving dates but I am expecting few surprises.

The November-born calves are being prepared for weaning and will graze silage aftermath once it joins the rotation next week. Meal will be introduced shortly at a rate of 2kg/day to prepare weanlings for sale in August targeting the export market.

I am targeting an average of 400kg liveweight for all bulls. All weanlings will be sold by October. Heifers will also get 2kg/day but this will be reduced if they are getting fat.

Calves were drenched with a white wormer last month and will get a second drench before sale. The later-born calves will be weaned by creep grazing ahead of cows from next month onwards.



### **Charlie Crawford Co Donegal**

Silage will be harvested this week, all being well. There are 40 acres of first-cut to be harvested but the weather over last weekend delayed cutting.

It is starting to go hard so it needs to be cut this week. It will be ensiled in the pit and one cut will normally feed all cows and weanlings over the winter.

Silage ground got slurry and two bags of 10:10:20, topped up with nitrogen. I am going to make some hay if we get the weather also. I sold hay last year and there was a good demand for it. It provides a great cash boost for the farm.

As a second cut will not be needed, I will probably sell silage as a standing crop. This worked well last year also. If there is surplus grass, it can be taken out as bales.

The breeding season is almost over

for this year. I started serving cows on 9 January through AI. I served seven heifers and six cows with AI.

The Charolais stock bull is breeding the rest of the herd and repeats. I scanned cows on 2 April and had 12 in calf to the AI.

The stock bull was removed from heifers on 10 May and will be removed from cows at the end of this month. There will be 33 cows and 14 heifers to calve between this autumn and early 2015.

I sold yearling heifers in early May at an average of 385kg liveweight. There were a few light heifers, which brought the average down. They averaged €2.20/kg.

There are four cull cows being fed at the minute. They will be sold live after weaning. I think heifers are too dear to buy at present. I will probably increase the sheep numbers this year or buy heifers in autumn. The first lambs will be drafted this week, which reduces grazing demand. Grass growth is 60kg DM/ha/day and there are 24 days ahead.



## **CHANGING SYSTEMS - THE FIGURES**

### **Weanling system (based on 100 cows)**

- ➔ 48 bull weanlings sold @ 350kg @ €2.50/kg = €42,000.
- ➔ 48 beef heifers sold @ 580kg @ €2.20/kg = €61,248.
- ➔ 20 cull cows @ €1,300 = €26,000.
- ➔ Minus 20 in-calf heifers @ €1,500 = €30,000.
- ➔ Gross output (67ha) = €99,248 or €1,481/ha.

### **Light stores (based on 100 cows)**

- ➔ 48 steers sold @ 470kg @ €2.30/kg = €51,888.
- ➔ 48 beef heifers sold @ 580kg @ €2.20/kg = €61,248.
- ➔ 20 cull cows @ €1,300 = €26,000.
- ➔ Minus 20 in-calf heifers @ €1,500 = €30,000.
- ➔ Gross output (67ha) = €109,136 or €1,629/ha.

### **Heavy stores (based on 80 cows)**

- ➔ 38 steers sold @ 600kg @ €2.20/kg = €50,160.
- ➔ 38 beef heifers sold @ 580kg @ €2.20/kg = €48,488.
- ➔ 16 cull cows @ €1,300 = €20,800.
- ➔ Minus 16 in-calf heifers @ €1,500 = €24,000.
- ➔ Gross output (67ha) = €95,448 or €1,424/ha.

### **Other considerations**

Finishing bulls under 16 months would be heavily reliant on concentrates, as silage quality is variable on farm.

Bulls would have to be housed earlier and the intensive feeding period started immediately.

At a housing/weaning weight around 350kg liveweight, a daily gain of 1.5kg/day over 200 days would see cattle being finished in May at approximately 650kg liveweight.

Bulls should achieve U grades and be eligible for payment on the QPS grid.

Total concentrates would be close to two tonnes per head over their lifetime so concentrate price would be important as it will have a major bearing on the margin.

Continuing with the current system and focusing on improving weight gain in yearling cattle to target the export market is a possible option to consider, as the

price per kilogramme will reward weight gain in cattle.

Hybrid vigour may be limited in the herd with repeatedly breeding to Limousin genetics. An outcross bred may have a positive effect on cattle performance.

### **Adviser comment**

The important thing for Heinz is not to rush into a decision without considering all options.

Completing budgets for each potential system will allow for a better comparison between systems so that the correct decision is made.

Peter Lawrence



With reduced for buying yearling bulls, Heinz Eggert is considering his options for selling cattle in an effort to increase gross margin.

target 0.6kg liveweight per day would result in a turnout weight in mid-March of around 400kg liveweight.

Assuming that yearling stores are selling at an average of 470kg liveweight, gross output would be increased to €1,629/ha.

Taking variable costs at 40% would produce a gross margin of €660/ha, which is higher than the system currently in place.

The system is dependent on getting maximum weight gain from grass and an early turnout in spring. There is ground available to graze and maintain cow numbers in the system.

### **Heavy stores**

Taking the steers through until autumn would increase liveweight per hectare.

Cow numbers would be reduced to 80 in order to graze the steers.

The target sale weight of 600kg is realistic, based on

weight for age.

Again, the system depends on getting maximum weight gain from grass and keeping concentrates to a minimum level. There is a lack of housing available to possibly take these cattle through to finish.

Depending on market prices, there is potential to increase output to €1,424/ha at a sale price of €2.20/kg liveweight. This is the equivalent of €4/kg beef price at 55% kill-out. At the outlined prices, gross margin would increase to €569/ha.

The systems outlined are based on the average prices according to MartWatch data in the past year.

Cattle could command a premium price if sold through the marts and potentially add up to 20c/kg to the sale price.

Maintaining cow numbers under the steer option and increasing liveweight from grass could increase gross margin further to €720/ha.