

# BETTERfarm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

## Managing grass quality in mid-season



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Grass growth averaged 77kg DM/ha/day this week on the programme farms. The high pressure weather system has brought plenty of fine weather which has really im-

proved grazing conditions on the heavier farms after some heavy showers last week.

With the fine weather grass growth rates have improved. Re-growth on silage ground and grazed paddocks has been rapid where fertilizer has been recently applied. Some of the programme farmers have reported that even in well managed ryegrass swards, grass is now turning to stem as it produces a seed head.

For some farms that only require one cut of silage due

to a carryover of fodder reserves from last year, as well as additional acres from the grazing block harvested this year, there will be a requirement to top grass after this rotation where stocking rates are less intensive.

### Cost

While topping will remove headed out grass and ensure a fresh, palatable re-growth in the next grazing, it does add cost to the system. While it is cheaper than producing bales, there is often grass

going to waste. Some of the farmers are topping one day in advance of stock moving onto the next paddock in an effort to get cattle to clean up the grass clippings.

On higher stocked farms, or farms with multiple livestock groups, the lower priority groups are cleaning out paddocks instead of topping. For this to work, the farmers are running larger groups of dry cows or sheep. Having temporary paddocks is also necessary as the electric wire can be moved to suit the

group size and force cows to eat off the rejected grass.

In such a scenario, the programme advisers are stressing the importance of moving cows on before they start to graze off the re-growth. Once grass is grazed down to the plant base, it will start to regrow after three to four days. Therefore, cows are only getting a maximum of two days to clean out paddocks which is why group size and paddock size is important.

In contrast, some of the

farms operating on very dry ground have short-term stocking rates on their grazing platform of more than 6.0LU/ha by closing off ground for cutting.

Taking a 650kg cow with 150kg calf at foot at the outlined stocking density means that grazing demand on these farms is approximately 90kg DM/ha/day which is matching the grass growth on these farms. As a result, there is little grass surplus building and no requirement for topping.



## ANALYSIS

### PETER LAWRENCE

“Spring 2014 proved to be quite difficult to manage cattle at grass as rainfall was well above average”

## As midway point in the grazing season approaches, we review the season to date

Due to our temperate climatic conditions, grass is the cornerstone of livestock production systems in Ireland. Grazed grass is our cheapest source of feed. Therefore, the biggest challenge on many livestock farms is trying to maximise the proportion of grazed grass in an animal's lifetime.

As the indoor winter feeding period is the most expensive period on livestock farms, getting animals out to grass early in spring can reduce production costs and increase animal performance significantly.

A key goal for the BETTER Farm participants is to have the farm set up for an early turn-out of priority stock in order to help lengthen the grazing season and reduce winter feeding costs. The farms follow a grazing plan for their first rotation to manage livestock and grass supplies as the spring progresses.

However, spring 2014 proved to be quite difficult to manage cattle at grass as rainfall was well above average for all regions of Ireland (Table 1). Consequently, ground conditions did not permit the early turn-out of stock or spreading of slurry on many of the programme farms with heavy soils.

Despite the farms building up strong grass covers over winter, many of the programme farmers on drier land could not turn stock out to grass until early March. Farms working on heavier soils did not get cattle out until mid-March to early April.

In February, some parts of the country had almost three times more rainfall than in the same month in 2013. The western regions experienced higher volumes of rainfall in March than eastern regions which delayed the start of the grazing season and made managing the first rotation difficult on many farms.

As a result of the delayed

turn-out, some farms were unable to graze off their silage ground and therefore opted for an early first cut. Also, during periods of heavy rainfall in March and May, some farmers were forced to re-house stock for short periods of time to protect grass swards from damage.

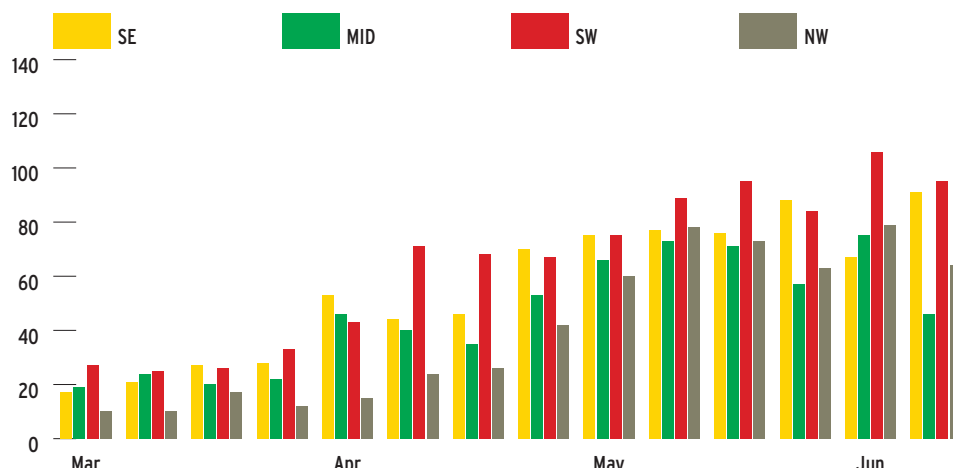
### Growth rates

Figure 1 illustrates the regional grass growth on the BETTER Farms for spring 2014. Weekly growth measurements began in early March as cattle were being turned out to grass. As can be seen from the graph, growth rates were slow to increase during early to mid-March on the majority of programme farms but increased significantly in late March and early April.

Although soil temperatures were higher than in the corresponding period in 2013 (Table 2), they also recorded a significant increase

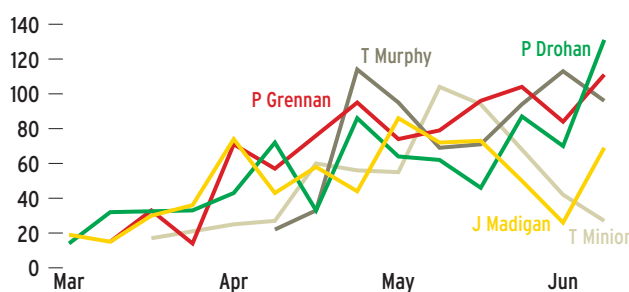
**Figure 1**

2014 regional grass growth on the Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal BETTER beef farms



**Figure 2**

2014 grass growth on individual Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal BETTER beef farms in the southeast



### KEY POINTS

- ➔ Higher than average rainfall made grassland management difficult.
- ➔ Growth has remained strong since April, with large surpluses on many farms.
- ➔ It is crucial that farmers match supply with demand to maintain a leafy digestible sward.

in April across all regions, which coincides with the increase in grass growth.

It is interesting to compare the spring soil temperatures between 2013 and 2014 for all regions but unfortunately it brings back bad memories of the fodder shortage and delayed growth.

Grass growth has remained strong since April 2014 and many farms have been growing a lot more grass than their herds require for grazing on a daily basis. Hence, many farms have removed surplus grass from the grazing platform as baled silage in order to maintain sward quality. In-

creasing the stocking rate on grazing blocks by closing off land for silage has helped the programme farmers match grazing demand to the grass growth rate.

Figures 2 to 5 show the variation within farms in the south-east, south-west, north west and midlands regions for 2014 grass growth. Factors such as soil fertility, opening grass cover in spring time, topography, soil type, date of first grazing and the content of perennial ryegrass in the sward are all contributors to the variation within each farm.

However, as all programme farmers are walking their

paddocks on a weekly basis and recording grass growth, they are now more competent grassland managers. As a result, they have a better understanding of what is happening on the whole farm each week in terms of grass availability. They can base their management decisions on the data generated from the grass measuring programme used.

### Demand

Grass growth is dynamic in nature and the months of April, May and early June are probably the most important months of the year when managing perennial ryegrass



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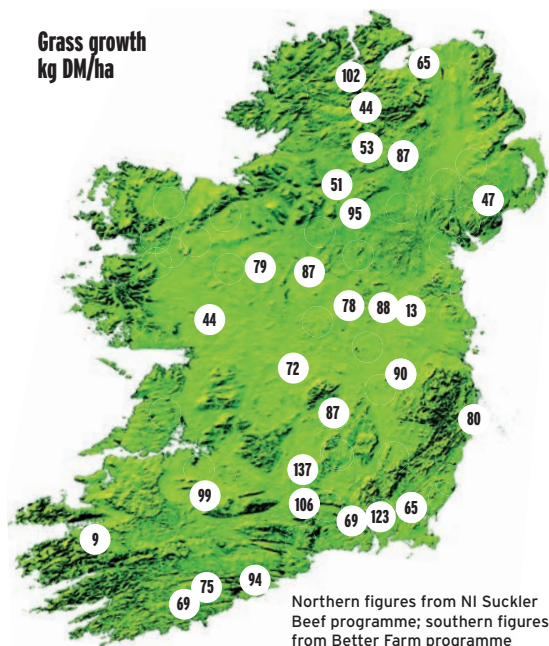
## WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Grass growth averaged 77kg DM/ha/day this week.
- ➔ Grazing rotations are being maintained at 12 to 18 days depending on land type and stocking rate.
- ➔ Grass is now heading out in well managed ryegrass swards.
- ➔ Lower stocked farms are topping paddocks in this rotation to maintain sward quality.
- ➔ Some farms are topping the day before cattle are due to be moved to reduce wasted grass.
- ➔ On dry farms, stocking rates are being increased so that grass demand matches growth rate.

### Dates for diary

- ➔ 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.

Grass growth  
kg DM/ha



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

Figure 3

2014 grass growth on individual Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal BETTER beef farms in the midlands

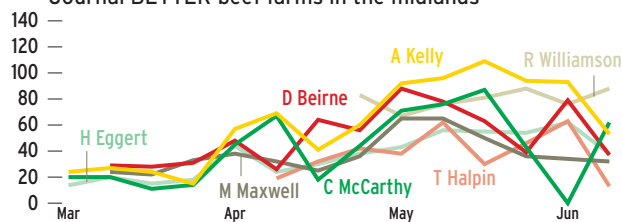


Figure 4

2014 grass growth on individual Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal BETTER beef farms in the southwest

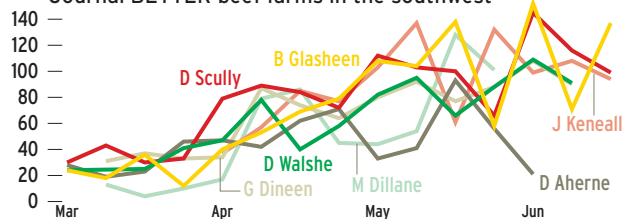


Figure 5

2014 grass growth on individual Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal BETTER beef farms in the northwest

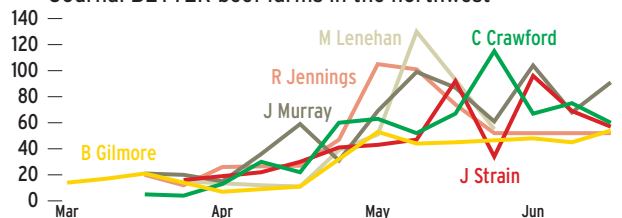


Table 1: Met Eireann regional monthly and total rainfall (mm)

Region	Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	Total
North-west <sup>1</sup>	2014	195	197	91	28	93	10.8	613.3
	2013	143	72	35	83	120	75.0	1130.8
South-west <sup>2</sup>	2014	176	195	87	38	90	11.6	598.5
	2013	107	50	30	63	68	64.2	932.7
North-east <sup>3</sup>	2014	116	103	61	36	82	21.1	419.0
	2013	100	46	66	56	60	62.8	862.2
South-east <sup>4</sup>	2014	147	177	65	53	78	36.1	556.2
	2013	76	36	58	44	36	37.5	763.7

<sup>1</sup>Data recorded from Markree <sup>2</sup>Data recorded from Shannon Airport

<sup>3</sup>Data recorded from Dunsany <sup>4</sup>Data recorded from Oakpark

Table 2: Met Eireann monthly mean 10cm soil temperature

Region	Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June
North-west <sup>1</sup>	2014	4.2	4.8	7.0	11.2	13.8	15.4
	2013	4.6	4.6	4.6	7.9	11.6	16.1
South-west <sup>2</sup>	2014	5.7	5.3	7.7	10.9	13.6	15.4
	2013	5.8	5.3	5.2	8.7	12.6	16.4
North-east <sup>3</sup>	2014	4.3	4.8	6.6	10.7	13.0	14.8
	2013	4.4	4.1	4.0	7.4	12.0	15.6
South-east <sup>4</sup>	2014	4.4	5.0	7.1	11.6	13.6	15.3
	2013	4.9	4.5	4.8	8.6	12.9	17.2

<sup>1</sup>Data recorded from Markree <sup>2</sup>Data recorded from Shannon Airport

<sup>3</sup>Data recorded from Dunsany <sup>4</sup>Data recorded from Oakpark

Table 3: Grass supply, growth rate and stocking rates on BETTER beef farms (8 to 14 June 2014)

Region	Farm Cover (kg DM/ha)	Stocking Rate (LU/ha)	Growth Rate (kg DM/ha/day)	Farm Demand (kg DM/ha/day)
North-west	785	3.42	59	39
South-west	1,427	3.49	94	48
Midlands	779	2.85	48	38
South-east	792	3.44	85	46
Average	986	3.30	71	43

swards. Grass growth is peaking and the morphology of the sward is changing as the plant changes to an inflorescence state i.e. heading out or producing a seed head.

Therefore, it is critical that farmers match grass supply with demand in order to maintain a leafy digestible sward. Table 3 summarises the farm grass supply and growth rates on the programme farms from 8 to 14 June.

As can be seen from the data, grass is growing well in excess of demand on the BETTER farms. Growth rates are averaging 71kg DM/ha/day and demand is run-

ning at 43kg DM/ha/day.

Many of the programme farmers have taken out surplus grass as baled silage or closed up extra ground for first cut silage to increase their stocking rate on grazing ground. This will help to maintain pre-grazing sward cover yields between 1,300 – 1,700 kg DM/ha (8cm to 10cm) and improve utilisation.

### Rotation length

In addition to this, the length of the grazing rotations have been reduced on most farms in late May from 18 to 21 days to having 12 to 14 days of grass ahead of cattle. This basically means that if cattle

finish grazing a paddock today, they will be back grazing the same paddock again in 12 days time.

Having a shorter grazing rotation means that there is less chance of a heavy grass cover building up between grazings. Lower grass covers mean cattle can graze the paddock out tighter inside two to three days. As a result, there is less rejected grass needing topping.

If the rotation length is too long, then covers will be heavier between grazings.

As a result, there is a tendency to leave cattle in a paddock for a longer period than normal to try and graze

the cover off.

In most instances, heavy covers will not be grazed off properly and cattle will spoil grass by trampling and lying on it. By holding cattle in a paddock for a longer period of time, the subsequent paddocks will have grass covers that are getting heavier and heavier with more stem than leaf for grazing.

The recent heavy showers and broken weather in late May and early June made it difficult to graze paddocks out tight and hence affected utilisation. However, the current spell of dry weather will help to get grazing back on track.

## FARMER FOCUS

### Mike Dillane Location

The good weather is greatly welcomed down here in Kerry this week as it has been a difficult year so far. I have all my first-cut silage in the pit at this stage. I cut 60 acres on 27 May. This ground was closed up on 17 April and fertilized. My reclaimed land really showed its value this year with a 16t crop of fresh grass harvested and no issues with picking up the crop despite only having a few dry days before mowing and lifting.

A further 17 acres was ensiled yesterday. This will be slightly poorer quality, approximately 65 DMD and will be fed to cows pre-calving. I will take out paddocks as bales from now on along with 15 acres of second cut around 20 July before my farm open day is held. I am continuing to spread a bag of CAN after each grazing but will cut back to half this rate once after

grass is back in the rotation next week.

All calves were dosed for worms and are performing well. I will weigh them around the start of July to see how they performed since their last weighing in mid March. The creep feeder has just been introduced to all autumn-born calves and they will be weaned in next few weeks. The best quality calves may be sold for export. The remainder will be finished as bulls under 16 months and heifers at 14 to 15 months.

All of this will depend on prices offered for them live versus the predicted margin from finishing.

Culls will be offered meal at grass once weaned and hopefully killed or sold live by September. I killed them off grass in December last year. My finishing heifers will begin with 3kg of meal in the next few weeks. They will hopefully be killed in August at around 18 to 20 months of age and weigh around 300kg carcass.



### Billy Glasheen Co Tipperary

All of my first-cut silage, which came to 30 acres, was harvested at the end of May and I was quite happy with the yield. Grass bulked up well before cutting and yields were close on 14t of silage per acre on a fresh-weight basis. Even with the higher yields, silage quality is also excellent and ideal for finishing cattle.

Since then, I have managed to harvest around 16 acres of surplus grass from grazing paddocks as bales and will take out more in the next week. I am carrying a stocking rate of around 3.6 LU/ha at the moment and have around 30 days ahead of me, which is too high; hence the reason for making more baled silage. Grass growth has been excellent this year and last week I measured 138kg DM/ha/day, which was my highest ever recording. I am currently feeding 36 steers for finishing at grass. They are eat-

ing 3.5kg/head/day of a grass finisher nut and will be killed in around one week's time. I will begin to replace these stock with lighter stores once the finishers are gone.

I am continuing to spread a bag of CAN per acre after each grazing. All my P and K applications for this year are finished. I have spread between 2000 and 3000 gallons per acre of cattle slurry on silage ground, depending on soil index for second-cut silage. This was topped up with three bags of CAN per acre. Topping is also being carried out at the minute to maintain pasture quality so that finishing cattle are on top-quality grass over the rest of the season. With the good weather this week, I am getting up to date with a lot of field work. I have burnt off three acres with glyphosate for reseeding this week.

Also, I am hoping to start carrying out drainage work on a wet field as soon as possible to improve production from the sward.

