

BETTER farm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Grass growth under pressure on farms



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Rainfall has been sporadic and very localised across the country in the past week. The programme farmers who are operating on lighter, drier soils are seeing the lack of

moisture impacting on grass growth.

Regrowth is slower to establish after grazing, even where fertilizer has been applied.

Some farms have been holding off on applying nitrogen due to the drier weather, but with the recent showers, there has been a move to get nitrogen onto grazing land to drive growth rates.

Silage aftermaths that have rejoined the grazing rotation are now being grazed.

This additional land has helped to reduce stocking

“ There has been a move to get nitrogen onto land to drive growth rates

pressure and grass demand. It has also helped to maintain rotation lengths where grass growth rates have been dropping in recent weeks.

Protecting regrowth

Where grass regrowth is slower to come, it is important that the programme farms keep moving stock every three to four days to

prevent cattle from grazing off new grass shoots.

With ground conditions excellent, there has been an opportunity to reduce the size of grazing paddocks using temporary electric wire.

Reducing the paddock size has added extra days to the grazing rotation as there is less wasted grass.

This has also helped to protect regrowth because the grazing area is more controlled.

As cattle are on a smaller area, they are moving onto the next grazing allocation more frequently, which pre-

vents regrowth from being grazed off.

Using such methods has increased grass utilisation, as there has been no requirement to top grass on stock removal.

It does rely on having multiple water troughs when splitting fields to reduce size. Alternatively, wire has been set to make best use from existing troughs.

Heavier farms

On the heavier farms, the programme farmers have been able to utilise the whole farm for grazing.

On heavy clay ground, soil moisture levels are much higher and grass growth has not been as severely affected.

The farms have taken every opportunity to utilise grass through grazing and by making additional winter forage, as these farms are more inclined to re-house stock during prolonged wet weather.

They also have much longer winter periods.

There has been some drainage work carried out on a few heavier farms to try to improve land carrying capacity during wet periods.



FARM WALK TOM HALPIN

“ The herd has expanded from 70 to 90 cows, fuelling a 31% increase in gross margin ”

At yesterday's BET-TER farm open day, the future direction of host farmer Tom Halpin's suckler herd was outlined.

Producing weanlings has been working well to date. However, with improving grassland and herd genetics there is potential to carry more stock through to heavier weights and sell as strong stores or as finished cattle.

Increasing output per hectare in a weanling system is challenging without a substantial increase in cow numbers.

Tom has already expanded his herd from 70 to 90 cows, which has fuelled an increase of 31% in gross margin over the past two years.

Any further increase in gross margin will now depend on getting more weight on cattle to increase sale value.

However, this increase in weight must come from grass rather than concentrates,

otherwise the higher input costs from meal will counter the increased sale value.

Future direction

The current production system on Tom Halpin's farm involves a split calving herd, with 60% calving in spring (February/March) and the remainder calving in late summer (July/August).

Tom is happy with this arrangement as it suits his current housing and calving box capacity (it is not possible to calve all cows in the same period on the farm).

The split calving also spreads the labour requirement on the farm over a greater period of time, as there was an early lambing ewe flock present, although this is now being dispersed in favour of the suckler herd.

The spring-born bulls are traditionally sold as weanlings in November or December.

These weanlings have typically weighed 430kg at

approximately 10 months of age.

With creep feeding restricted to 3kg/day over a period of 90 days, this highlights the critical importance of having high-yielding cows to achieve high sale weights in weanling systems. Creep feeding costs are approximately €70/head, taking concentrates at €260/t.

The spring-born heifers were also traditionally sold as weanlings but, in 2013, Tom decided to overwinter these animals and turn them out to grass for a second grazing season.

The plan was to sell the heifers at approximately 16 months of age with a target sale weight of 470kg live-weight.

These heifers have already surpassed their target live-weight, weighing 477kg on 26 June, yet the average age for the group was just short of 15 months old.

The summer-born calves are normally weaned in



Spring-born calves are sold as weanlings on Tom Halpin's farm. In an effort to increase output, he is considering the option of finishing his own cattle in future.

February and turned out for a second grazing prior to selling live at 12 months of age.

Bulls and heifers typically weigh 470kg and 380kg at sale time. Following weaning, the cows remain housed until there is sufficient grass available for all stock groups. Weanlings and spring-calving cows take grazing priority.

Once the dry summer cows are turned out, they are used to clean off paddocks after these priority groups. This helps to restrict their intake of spring grass in advance of calving in June.

Comparing systems

Table 1 highlights the estimated financial performance of the current weanling production system on the Halpin farm. The cost of

carrying the summer-calving suckler cow is higher than the spring-calving cow due to greater winter feed costs.

The winter diet for the summer cows consists of ad-lib silage and 1kg/day of concentrate ration, whereas the dry spring cows are on restricted silage diets.

The summer-born bull, due to the fact it has produced more liveweight from grass over two partial grazing seasons, has a higher net margin than the spring-born bull.

The opposite is the case for heifers. The spring-born heifers are now benefitting from a second grazing season.

Therefore, the spring-born heifers are achieving a higher weight gain from grazed grass.

As the results in Table 1 show, margin per cow is 50%

higher for the current spring-calving system on the Halpin farm when compared with the summer-calving system.

On a per hectare basis, the difference is somewhat less, at 37% more profitable, since the stock-carrying capacity of the summer system is slightly greater than that of the spring system.

It is important to bear in mind that the costs outlined in Table 1 do not take into account the integrated nature of the two systems.

There are benefits to be realised from both systems operating side-by-side.

For example, using the summer calves to mop up after the spring calves in early summer and how the summer calving system fits into Tom's farm facilities, layout and labour availability.



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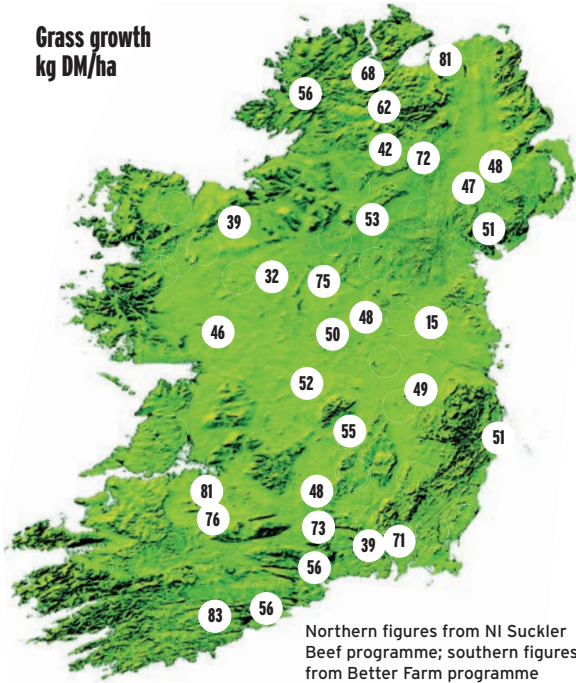
WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Average grass growth was 55kg DM/ha this week.
- ➔ Rainfall has been variable this week, with some farms receiving very little rain.
- ➔ Drier land is seeing grass growth drop due to the lack of soil moisture.
- ➔ On heavier farms, grass growth is better and grass utilisation is excellent.
- ➔ Paddock size is being altered to improve utilisation and protect regrowth.
- ➔ Drainage work has been carried out on some farms.

Dates for the diary

➔ **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

Future farm options

To examine some options for refining the production system on Tom's farm, three alternative systems were evaluated and are outlined here in Table 2.

In all cases, it was assumed that the 60:40 spring and summer calving split was continued.

The examples given are worked through to a net margin level, which includes fixed on-farm costs.

Option one

Option one involved taking the summer-born calves through to beef. In this case, the bulls are finished at 16 months of age in November/December and at a carcass weight of approximately 365kg.

The heifers are also finished at 16 months of age at the end of the second grazing season having been supplemented at grass for 90 days prior to slaughter.

The carrying capacity of the summer system is slightly lower than in the current system, since the bulls and heifers are retained on the farm for longer with a greater demand for grazed grass and grass silage. However, net margin per cow and per hectare will increase under this option.

Option two

With this option, it was assumed that all animals in both the spring and summer systems were taken through to beef.

The summer calves were finished as outlined for option one. The spring bulls were finished at 16 months of

Table 2: Financial impact of some future options for the Halpin farm

	Current system	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
Spring system	Weanling bulls, yearling heifers	Weanling bulls, yearling heifers	Finishing bulls at 16 months and heifers at 20 months	Weanling bulls and heifers
No of suckler cows	50	50	47	56
Net margin per cow (€)	277	277	330	204
Net margin per ha (€)	369	369	406	304
Summer system	Yearling bulls and heifers	Bulls and heifers finished at 16 months	Bulls and heifers finished at 16 months	Yearling bulls and heifers
No of suckler cows	36	34	32	37
Net margin per cow (€)	184	264	264	184
Net margin per ha (€)	268	351	351	268
Total farm system				
No of suckler cows	86	84	79	93
Net margin per cow (€)	249	273	310	198
Net margin per ha (€)	328	362	382	290

Table 1: Financial summary of the current spring and summer calving system on the Halpin farm

	Spring system	Summer system	Total farm system
Cows per ha	1.33	1.46	1.37
Suckler cow cost (€/hd)	552	599	566
Bull margin* (€/hd)	808	844	819
Heifer margin* (€/hd)	860	691	809
Overall net margin per cow (€)	277	184	249
Overall net margin per ha (€)	369	268	339

*Excludes the cost of the suckler cow

age at 400kg carcass weight, having been fed a high concentrate diet from weaning to slaughter.

Additional shed investment was included in these assumptions, since Tom would have insufficient capacity to carry these extra bulls over the winter.

The spring heifers were finished at the end of the second grazing season and were supplemented with 3kg at pasture for 90 days prior to slaughter.

Similar to option one, cow

numbers are lower due to the greater feed demand of progeny.

However, margin is improved due to the significantly higher output on a per cow and per hectare basis.

Option three

Option three explores the financial impact of selling all calves as weanlings. In the example, the spring-born animals are sold at approximately 10 months of age at the end of the grazing season.

In the case of the summer-

“Tom has already expanded his herd from 70 to 90 cows, which has fuelled an increase of 31% in gross margin over the past two years

born animals, they sold at approximately 12 months of age following a 120-day post-weaning grazing period in the second grazing season.

This system is very similar to the current production system. The only change is to sell spring-born heifers as weanlings rather than yearlings.

This option allows an increase in the number of cows on the farm and reduces output and margin.

— Paul Crossan, Teagasc

FARMER FOCUS

Michael Smith
Co Cavan

It is not often that I am looking for rain on this farm, but we would definitely benefit from a few good showers to help grass growth.

My drier fields have recorded half the growth compared to the previous week. However, the heavier parts of the farm are doing well. I am grazing the dry autumn cows on the wetter land to clean off grazed grass.

There have been plenty of times when cows could not get onto this land but cows are cleaning it off well. The autumn herd is due to start calving around 1 August.

In total, there are 18 autumn cows. I usually carry 20 autumn calvers so I am hoping to add a couple of cows to maintain numbers.

The autumn-born bulls are due to be weighed now and I reckon they are around 400kg.

Normally, I would be offloading these bulls through the local

markets. Prices for good weanlings are good, so I will do a few budgets on how much it would take to finish them and compare the margin from selling now or taking through to finish.

Spring cows are doing well. Cows appear to be settled in-calf. There has been one older cow repeating in the past week, but there have been no other repeats for at least five weeks now.

Spring cows will be scanned on 1 August. Rather than take the bull away from cows, I sell late-calving cows based on scanning results, as this is easier to manage in terms of grazing and handling the stock bull.

I have only 10 acres closed for second-cut silage as fodder stocks are good. There were 32 acres of first-cut silage ensiled on 30 May.

It could have been cut a week earlier but weather was not ideal. In addition, I have made 90 round bales of silage from surplus grass, as well as 31 bales of hay.

Willie Treacy
Co Louth

First-cut silage was harvested in early June. I cut 70 acres and it really bulked out in the final fortnight once the weather picked up.

Second-cut silage has been closed off with 45 acres to be harvested. The remaining 25 acres are coming back into the grazing rotation to ease the stocking pressure.

Second-cut silage received 2,300 gallons per acre of slurry and 75 units of nitrogen, plus 15 units of sulphur. Grazing ground got farmyard manure, as all remaining slurry went onto silage ground.

My land needs rain, as we seem to have missed most of the showers in the past week. Grass growth has been hit

due to the moisture deficit and ground has been

come very hard. But at least I am able to utilise all available grass fully.

With a high stocking rate, there is little surplus grass. Therefore, I bought 130 round bales of hay from a neighbour and this will be used for feeding dry cows.

There are 55 autumn cows due to start calving in the next fortnight. They are tightly stocked on a bare paddock close to the yard. They will be calved outside unless they run into problems.

Minerals are being supplied through lick buckets and they got a bolus earlier this spring. Breeding has finished for the spring herd and there has been no heat activity for a while now, which is a good sign.

Last year's spring bulls are being slaughtered at the moment. The first group killed averaged 380kg deadweight under 16 months.

Bulls are being offered ad-lib meal and good pit silage. There are still 30 to kill with some going this week. Last year's autumn bulls weighed 400kg on 6 June.

I will do a few budgets on these cattle, but I think I will end up selling them to a feedlot rather than finish them myself.

