

BETTER farm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Weather helps with autumn grazing



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The programme farms have been able to spread one last round of nitrogen after the current rotation. With soil temperature holding close to 20°C, there has been a great response in terms

of grass growth. For most farms, grazing is now in the second-last rotation for the year. Grazing rotations are running from 25 to 40 days ahead of cattle across the farms.

Good ground conditions have allowed excellent utilisation from cattle. On reseeded ground, swards continue to be grazed tight to 3.5cm to 4cm in residual height. On older swards, or on heavier ground, covers are being grazed down to 5cm.

The reason for this is that the slightly higher residual height helps to speed up regrowth, as older swards are

less productive so late in the year. Some of the farms are seeing as much as four times more growth from reseeded swards compared with less productive swards with little ryegrass at present.

At the end of the next rotation, drier paddocks will start to be closed up for spring turnout. Closing dry ground first will allow drier

ground to be used in spring.

Heavier ground is slower to start growing in spring, so is less suited to early turnout. Heavier paddocks will continue to be grazed into the autumn, but require careful management to prevent sward damage.

Grassland that was reseeded in August has now received a post-emergence

spray to control weeds.

Spraying reseeds now gives better control of docks and chickweed.

Leaving these weeds in the sward until the spring gives them the opportunity to develop a proper root system that can be difficult to kill.

Post-emergence sprays are being applied from six weeks after reseeding. September

reseeds will be sprayed, weather-dependant, from early October. From previous experience on the farms, getting reseeds grazed off before closing in the winter is important. Light spring weanlings, autumn calves or lambs have been used to good effect to graze off reseeds without poaching ground and will be repeated this year also.

Table 1: Converting growth rate into kilos 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.

BETTER FARM WALK REVIEW

KEEPING SUCKLER SYSTEM SIMPLE

BETTER farm participant Chris McCarthy is focused on keeping his suckler system simple to suit off-farm work. Just two hours a day are spent running his 55-cow herd. **Kieran Mailey** reports

A large crowd of almost 800 farmers attended the BETTER farm open day held on Chris McCarthy's 28ha grassland farm near Mullingar last week. Those who attended left the event with one clear message from Chris – keep the farming system as simple as possible.

According to Chris, there is no need to over-complicate the suckler system. When a system becomes complicated, it affects the ability to manage the herd. A simple system means that he can give attention to detail throughout the year.

Off-farm employment as a tiling contractor means that Chris has limited time to spend carrying out farm tasks. He outlined to the crowd that he spends two hours per day completing all management tasks for his 55-cow suckler herd.

"My job cannot suffer because of the cows. I am always thinking and planning

out when things need to be done," said Chris.

Planning

The herd is spring-calving and calves over a 10-week period from late January to early April. While calving cows in such a tight timeframe is labour intensive, it is short-term according to Chris. He can plan better for the calving period as he knows when the cows are due to start and finish calving.

"Farmers know when they are going to make silage and when they are going to sell cattle, so there is no reason why they can't plan better for when they want cows to start and finish calving.

"Compact calving is a heavy workload for a short period of time, but I know when it will finish, which means I can get on with other things on farm," said Chris.

With limited time to spend on-farm, having a compact calving period offers Chris other benefits, such as:

➤ All dry cows can be batched together and fed the same diet over winter.

➤ All cows can be vaccinated for scour, BVD and Lepto on the same day.

➤ Calves are vaccinated, dehorned and wormed as one group on the same day.

The farm is set up for a one-man operation. Laneways and fencing have been installed to allow movement of cattle from field to field with little effort. Cattle can be brought into the yard for handling with ease.

During the winter period, cows can be moved between the dry house and calving pens without the need for additional help due to the layout and use of gates.

Cows coming close to calving and in loose boxes are monitored using cameras that are linked to Chris's phone.

Breeding

Replacements are bought in annually from known farms



Part of the crowd of 800 farmers who attended the farm walk at Chris McCarthy's farm.

and purchased in-calf. Buying in-calf heifers means that there is one less stock group on farm, as Chris is not keeping a separate group of home-bred heifers. Buying from repeated sources means he knows the background of the animals and their health status.

Breeding his own heifers means Chris would require a maternal bull, as he said that AI is not an option for him. He does not have the time for heat detection or bringing in spring-calving cows for inseminating.

As the herd produces weanlings for sale, a maternal bull could compromise calf weight and quality for selling live.

Instead, the breeding programme is simple. Limousin and Simmental cross heifers are sourced off-farm to ensure that milk is being retained in cows.

As they are bought in-calf in autumn, Chris can focus on using terminal sires on his cows. Two Charolais bulls are used to serve cows and bred from CF52 and Balthazaar.

While growth and conformation are important, there is also a requirement for calving ease when selecting stock sires.

Cow condition also plays a huge part in calving ease. Stock bulls are often blamed for calving difficulty, yet no blame is placed on the cow

that is often overfat.

Using two bulls means there is a high conception rate in the herd. Compact calving means that large numbers of cows will be in heat at one time, which is difficult for one bull to handle.

This year, only four cows are empty from 55 in a 10-week breeding period. Last year, there were only two empty cows at scanning. A later scan showed both cows to be in-calf.

Weanlings

All calves produced on-farm are sold in November and December. In the past few years, they have been sold out of the yard to repeat buyers.

Calves are weighed up to



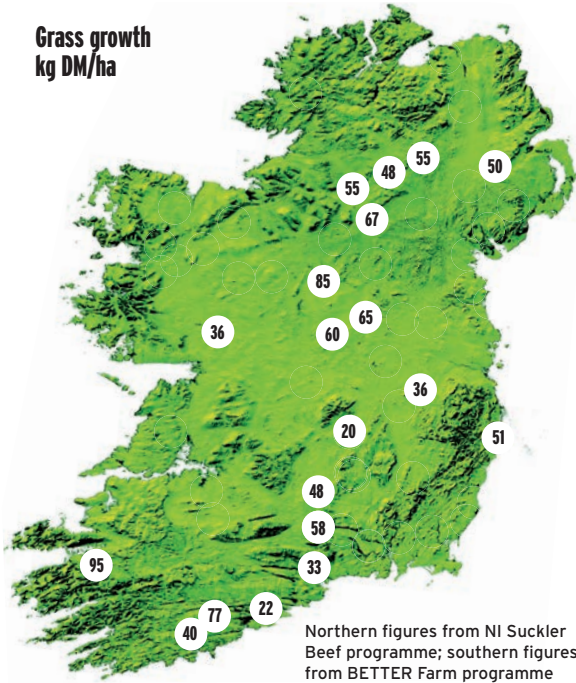
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WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Grass growth averaged 51kg DM/ha/day over the past week and is high for the time of year.
 - ➔ Some of the farms operating on drier land have opted to spread nitrogen on grazed ground again to build covers so that weanlings can be grazed into late autumn.
 - ➔ August reseeds are being sprayed for weeds. September reseeds will get a post-emergence spray in October if ground conditions allow.
 - ➔ Meal has been introduced to finishing cattle to prepare them for housing.
 - ➔ Cattle that are being finished off grass in the coming weeks have had feeding levels stepped up to increase fat covers.
- ➔ Allowing calves to forward creep graze ahead of the cows offers additional benefits other than helping to gradually wean the calf. Calves are getting good grass and, as they are grazing off the lush leaf, it reduces the tetany risk in cows.

TOP TIP



Weanlings are produced for sale in late autumn. Bulls have averaged 1.42kg/day from grass this summer.



Calving is being moved forward to increase sale weight in weanlings at sale time. This year, there was a difference of 87kg in liveweight between the first and last bull calves born in the herd.



are in strong body condition that you would assume are not milking, yet their calf is gaining 1.5kg/day and is as big as the cow.”

Bull calves have averaged 1.42kg/day since 10 July and weighed 288kg on 20 August. They will be sold at a target weight of 375kg liveweight. Heifers are gaining 1.29kg/day since 10 July and averaged 249kg on 20 August.

No meal has been fed to calves as yet. Meal will be introduced shortly ahead of weaning. Calves are creep grazing ahead of the cows on good grass.

The average daily live-weight gain of calves from birth to weaning on the farm over the past five years is outlined in Table 1. Bull calves, on average, have gained 1.36kg per day, while heifers averaged 1.20kg per day.

This performance is well ahead of the national average for bull and heifer calves, which currently stands at 1.15kg per day and 1kg per day, respectively.

Compared with the national average liveweight gain, Chris’s weanlings would be generating an additional €7,600 in terms of farm sales from his herd of 55 cows.

Considering that most of this weight gain is achieved from a grass-only diet, the actual margins are more than likely higher.

Calves have been vaccinated for pneumonia for the first time. The reason for this is that, as the days get shorter in autumn, it becomes more difficult to check cattle in the dark after his work. A calf with

the early signs of pneumonia could be easily missed. Vaccinating is a safeguard against illness.

Grassland

Over 50% of the farm has been reseeded since 2008, with 10% now reseeded annually. Most reseeding is carried out using minimum tillage, as it is quicker to get stock back onto the ground to graze compared with conventional ploughed reseeds.

Grass is measured weekly and silage is made from closing up surplus grass for baling. The farm consists of eight fields split into 17 paddocks.

“Setting up the paddocks has been one of the best things I have done on the farm. It makes stock management so much easier.

There is no wasted grass on farm now like before,” said Chris.

The farm follows the autumn planner to close up grazing ground in rotation. This ensures there is grass available for getting cows out to grass in late February to early March. The autumn planner for the farm is outlined in Table 2.

Gross margin

Gross margin on farm has increased from €649/ha to €860/ha in 2014, which is high for a weanling system. With suckler-to-weanling farms, weight for age is crucial and, more importantly, producing weight from grass.

Grazing costs on-farm are 30c/head to 40c/head, whereas 2kg of concentrates costs 50c/head at a purchase price of €250/t.

The herd has potential to reach the target of €1,000/ha gross margin. The herd has been expanding in recent years, which adds to the cost of production.

From this year on, the 55 cows will be producing a calf for sale. Adding the value of the extra calves sold and moving the calving date forward to early February will increase the average sale weight by 30kg to 40kg per head.

Variable costs are under control, so the additional output will increase gross margin in future.

Host farmer Chris McCarthy speaking at the BETTER farm walk last week.



Charolais stock bulls are used on all cows to produce high-quality weanlings.

Table 1: Comparison of daily liveweight gain

	Bulls (ADG from birth)	Heifers (ADG from birth)
Chris’s weanlings (‘09-‘14)	1.36kg/day	1.20kg/day
National average (NA)	1.15kg/day	1kg/day
Weight difference in 10 months over NA	+63kg	+60kg
Value of extra weight *	€145	€132
Additional sales on 55 cows	€7,614	

*Assuming prices of €2.30/kg for bulls and €2.20/kg for heifers

Table 2: Autumn grazing for Chris McCarthy’s farm

Week	Grazing area		Actual area grazed per week
	per day (ha)	per week (ha)	
10-17 Oct	0.6	4.2	
17-24 Oct	0.6	4.2	
24-31 Oct	0.6	4.2	
31 Oct-7 Nov	0.6	4.2	
7-14 Nov	0.53	3.73	
14-21 Nov	0.53	3.73	
21-28 Nov	0.53	3.73	
Total		28ha	