

# BETTER farm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

## Managing grazing days ahead on BETTER Farms



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**G** rass growth averaged 39kg DM/ha/day this week as the recent warm spell continues to keep growth rates above the seasonal average. There was heavy rainfall in the south of the country at the end of

last week. While rainfall will have been welcomed on some of the programme farms that were suffering from a moisture deficit, the heavy volume of rain in a short period meant there was a high level of surface runoff as ground has been so dry.

Daytime temperatures have increased over the weekend as dry weather returned. Grass growth rates should receive a boost as a result of the rain and high temperatures. In the northern half of the country, there were some localised showers at the end of last week, but nothing to the extent of the

rainfall experienced in the south of the country.

Reseeds that were sown out this month should also benefit from last week's rain as it will stimulate germination. Soil temperatures are still in the high teens, which is enough to facilitate a quick sward establishment once the seed has burst, provided soil fertility is good.

### Grazing demand

Grass growth is generally running ahead of stock demand on most of the programme farms. This is helping to build grass covers for grazing weanlings and cows into late winter on drier farms. Grazing days ahead should be around 30 days going into October.

With weaning being car-

ried out and finishing cattle being sold or housed, grazing demand will be reducing on farms. This will help to maintain grazing days ahead once grass growth drops below demand and paddocks start to be closed up from mid-October onwards.

At a stocking rate of one 700kg cow and 250kg calf per acre, grazing demand is 47kg

DM/ha/day. If the calf is getting 2kg of meal per day, grazing demand will drop back to around 43kg DM/ha/day. Grass growth will most likely fall below demand within the next fortnight.

It will be difficult to build grass supplies after the current rotation finishes unless some stock are housed or finished.

**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

# GRASS YIELDS HAVE DOUBLED

**BETTER Farm participant Ger Dineen slaughtered his maternally bred Simmental bulls at 413kg carcass weight in 2014 at less than 14 months of age. Kieran Mailey reports**

**R**eseeding and improving his grassland management has doubled the amount of grass Ger Dineen is growing on the farm. "To me, that is like going out and renting another 50 acres of land but at a fraction of the cost," he said.

The comments were made at the autumn grassland walk held on his 32ha farm. A large crowd of over 400 farmers attended the event and heard firsthand how improved grassland management has helped Ger expand from 35 to 50 spring-calving cows since joining the BETTER Farm programme.

Grass growth for the farm is almost 14t of dry matter per hectare (DM/ha) this year, with reseeded fields yielding over 16 tonnes DM/ha to early September. Some older swards have yielded little over five tonnes DM/ha.

Ger outlined how walking the farm every week

has identified the poorest-performing fields and these are the ones that are reseeded, rather than reseeded fields in rotational order.

Installing extra drinkers so that they service at least four paddocks, rather than placing them in the corner of the field, meant that fields could be easily subdivided into smaller paddocks. Using temporary electric wire and plastic stakes gives a poten-

tial 34 paddocks on the home farm.

Ger aims to have paddocks grazed out in two days before moving the group onto the next paddock. Paddocks range from 0.5ha to 1ha in size. During prolonged periods of wet weather, cattle are grazed in one-day or half-day blocks to prevent soil damage and to keep cattle settled.

Ger said that without the paddocks, there is no way the farm could have increased the stocking rate to its current 2.2LU/ha. The increased stocking rate is mainly responsible for increasing the farm's gross margin from €555/ha in 2011 to an estimated €1,000/ha in 2014.

### Cost benefit

While there is a cost to setting up paddocks, Ger said he is being repaid by having lower feeding costs. Taking out surplus grass



A large crowd of over 400 suckler farmers attended the autumn farm walk at Ger Dineen's farm, Macroom.

has increased silage quality to 75 DMD for finishing bulls and store heifers. No meal will be fed to the heifers this winter, whereas in the past, 2kg was fed for 120 days. With a group of 20 heifers, this is a saving of €2,400.

Setting up paddocks meant that cows can stay out late into winter and get back to grass early in the spring using the one-day grazing blocks. "It costs me 30c/day to feed a cow at grass, compared to €1.30/day indoors on silage. That's a saving of €50/day for my herd, or €350 per week. If someone offered

you €350 per week to go out and move an electric fence every day, not many farmers would refuse it. I can shorten my winter feeding by six to seven weeks, which is a massive saving for this farm," said Ger.

### Free creep feed

No meal is fed to calves until after they are weaned. Calves are born from late January to late March and cows can be put out to graze in late February. Throughout the year, calves are allowed to creep ahead of the cows under the electric wire. Having

access to high-quality digestible grass helps to maintain calf performance.

"Creep grazing is my creep feeder. I do not use meal because I want to keep costs down. I select AI bulls that will breed milk in my cows and I want to utilise that rather than paying for meal and moving feeders every day," said Ger.

Calf performance is exceptional on farm. Bull calves weighed 313kg on 26 August and have gained 1.45kg/day from birth. Heifers weighed 309kg on the same day and have gained 1.39kg/day from



Host farmer Ger Dineen





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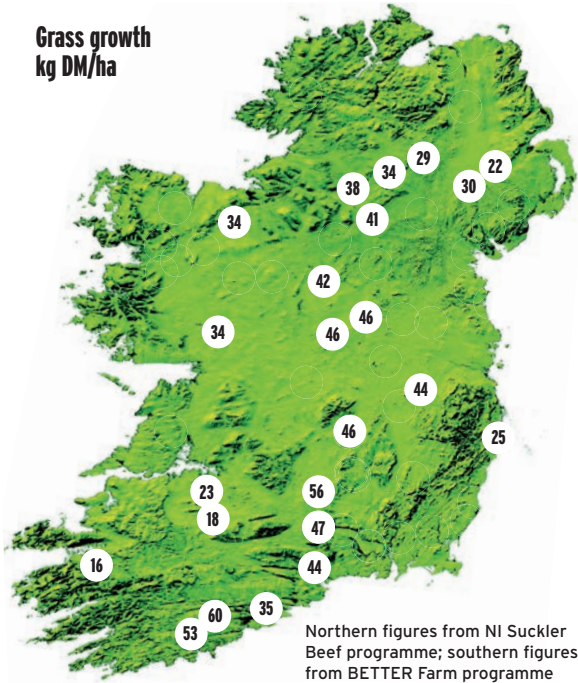


WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Grass growth averaged 39kg DM/ha/day this week.
- ➔ Heavy rainfall in the south has helped to replenish soil moisture on drier farms.
- ➔ Reseeds will benefit from rainfall and high temperatures over the weekend.
- ➔ Grass growth is still running ahead of grazing demand on most farms.
- ➔ Grazing days ahead are around 30 days on most farms.
- ➔ Weaning and selling weanlings or finishing stock will help to reduce grazing demand as grass growth drops.

➔ Where spreading slurry before the closed period, only spread on paddocks that have been properly grazed out. Spreading on medium (5-8cm) or heavy covers (9cm+) of grass will reduce the palatability, therefore reducing cattle intakes.

TOP TIP



Bull calves averaged 1.45kg/day from birth and weighed 313kg at six months of age.



A homemade creep gate is used to separate cows and calves during the breeding season.

Table 1: Three-year calving performance statistics

	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	Current national averages
Total no. of calvings	43	48	49	
No. of cows	29	41	36	
No. of heifers	14	9	13	
Calving interval (days)	375	369	374	395
Mortality at birth %	4.7%	4.2%	0%	4.7
Mortality at 28 days %	4.7%	4.2%	0%	6.1
Females not calved in period %	0%	0%	0%	10
Calves per cow per year	0.93	0.96	1.02	0.83
Births with known sire %	100	100	100	61
Births with difficult calving %		6.4%	9.8%	3.9

certainly not short of. No meal is fed to the cows after calving, just fresh grass, and by the time cows hit their peak milk production in mid to late April, the calf is well developed and able to utilise it.

Cow type is predominantly Simmental, with some Limousin breeding used as an outcross to keep hybrid vigour in the herd. Calving interval is 374 days for 2014, which is 40 days less than the national average. Table 1 outlines the breeding performance of the herd over the past three years.

According to Ger, the secret to getting high conception rates from AI at grass is to separate the cow and calf one month after calving. By separating the cow and calf, the restricted suckling helps to bring cows into heat.

Having such a compact calving spread of eight weeks means there is plenty of heat activity in the herd, making it easier to detect cows for inseminating.

“If calving spread was drawn out, you would have an odd cow cycling every few days which you could easily miss. Having a tight calving spread means there

will be lots of cows in heat at the same time, so mounting activity is high. Some cows will be raw from mounting so they are easily picked up in heat.”

Separating calves

Calves are separated by a simple process. Cows and calves are brought into the yard around one month post calving.

Cows are housed for three to four days while the calves are allowed out to an adjacent paddock. Calves gain access to this paddock from a laneway using a homemade creep gate.

After four days, cows are allowed back out to grass in a paddock beside the paddock where the calves graze. Cows are brought in for inseminating in the morning, at which point calves can access them through the creep gate on the laneway. Once the cows on heat are inseminated, the calves are herded back into their paddock and the cows to their paddock.

The whole process takes 10 to 15 minutes to complete. After eight weeks, the breeding season is over and the cows and calves are returned to graze as one group.

Finishing bulls

Bull calves are taken through to slaughter while heifers are repeatedly sold as yearlings for breeding. The finishing system was outlined by programme adviser Alan Dillon.

In 2014, bulls were finished in two groups, with the first 12 animals slaughtered at an average age of 13.8 months and at carcass weight of 413kg. They consumed 1.22t of meal in their lifetime.

At weaning, the calves were valued at €805/head. Taking them through to finish increased the value of the animals to €1,734/head. Even after deducting feed costs, Ger was €515/head better off finishing these bulls rather than selling as weanlings.

The remaining 10 bulls were slaughtered at 14.8 months of age and 404kg carcass weight. They consumed 1.6t of meal in their lifetime and left a margin of €380 more than selling as an autumn weanling. Table 2 outlines the finishing costs of the bulls in 2014.

Bulls graded E and U+ and highlight that careful selection of maternal bulls does not mean that calf performance or conformation has to suffer.



Cows are mainly Simmental cross. The herd is 100% bred to AI and only proven maternal sires are used.



Programme adviser Alan Dillon outlines the finishing performance of bulls. Young bulls achieved 413Kg carcass weight at less than 14 months of age.

Table 2: Analysis of finishing costs for bulls finished in 2014

Age at slaughter (months)	13.8	14.8
No. of bulls	12	10
Date of slaughter	08/04/14	26/05/14
Ration consumed (@€260/t)	€317 (1.22t)	€416 (1.6t)
Grass cost post-weaning (€)	15	15
Forage consumed (€/head)	57	70
Vet/medicines (€/head)	25	25
Price/kg (€)	4.24	4.24
Average carcass weight (kg)	413	404
Sale value (€)	1,734	1,711
Average animal value at weaning (350kg @ €2.30/kg)	805	805
Margin over selling as weanling (excl levies) @€2.30/kg	515	380



birth, which is fantastic weight for age in six-month-old calves.

Breeding

Local Teagasc adviser Michael Bourke outlined how the farm excelled at breeding. The herd is 100% bred to AI in an eight-week period, which is the result of a fertile herd of cows and first class management to achieve high levels of conception rates from spring-calving cows at grass.

All bulls selected for use in the herd are maternal sires. Milk is something cows are