

BETTER farm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Final grazing rotation begins on programme farms



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The final grazing rotation is now under way for the majority of the programme farms. With so much grass on farms, it will take good management to get covers grazed off before all cattle are housed.

The focus over the next week will be to close up paddocks in preparation for turnout next spring.

Using the autumn grazing planner, the farms will be targeting 60% of their existing grazing area to be grazed out by the start of November. The remaining 40% will be grazed out by mid-November.

With daily grass growth falling below livestock demand, cattle will be able to catch up with the number of grazing days ahead. The target date to start closing off paddocks is from 10 to 15 October for the programme farms. This means that paddocks grazed out this week-

end will not see livestock again this year.

Instead, they will be the first fields to carry stock in February/March. As weather and ground conditions can be unfavourable in early spring, it is important that the first paddocks closed this weekend are some of the driest fields. This is where good planning comes in to have these paddocks ready

for grazing now and closing up first.

As ground conditions begin to deteriorate in mid-to late autumn, low priority cattle, such as dry spring-calving cows, will be housed to relieve ground pressure. Lighter cattle will remain at grass as they will do less damage, especially if they are being moved every couple of days.

Some of the farms will bring grazing blocks down to one-day allocations or use on/off grazing to utilise grass and prevent sward damage.

Use of temporary electric wire will permit such grazing practices and has been used by the programme farms to good effect in the past.

With heavy rainfall in

the first half of this week, ground conditions on heavier farms require careful management.

Farms in the northwest have been affected most severely by the heavy rainfall, but moving cattle to fresh grass before they become unsettled and continuing to offer meals to weanlings has helped to prevent major surface damage.

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.



ON THE GROUND DONIE AHERN

“Over the grazing season, bulls averaged 1.55kg/day from a grass diet”

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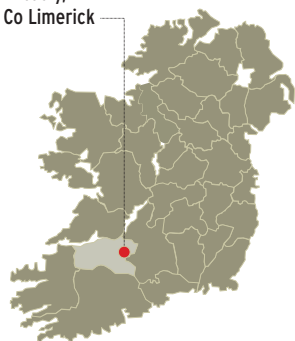
Donie Ahern farms 68ha of grassland near Kiltelly, Co Limerick. Donie runs 84 suckler cows with the help of his son Padraig. The herd is split, with 65 cows calving from late January to April and the remainder of the herd calving in September and October.

Donie and Padraig have worked closely with programme adviser Alan Dillon throughout their time in the BETTER farm programme, as well as their local Teagasc adviser Pat Blackwell.

Stocking rate on the farm has increased from 1.69LU/ha to 2.23LU/ha as a result of improved grassland.

Producing more home-bred cattle and being able to buy in store cattle in April and May has increased output from €1,347 in 2011 to €2,044/ha in 2013.

Kiltelly,
Co Limerick



Gross margin has increased from €474/ha in 2011 to €920/ha in 2013. The farm is firmly on course to reach and hopefully surpass the €1,000/ha gross margin target in 2014.

Herd background

Cow type is mostly Limousin cross Friesian, sourced from Donie's brother who runs a dairy unit. Heifers are bought in-calf to Limousin bulls. Some home-bred replacements have been kept for breeding.

However, Donie prefers the dairy cross heifer purely for the benefits of increased milk to deliver heavier weanlings. Weaning/housing weights typically reach 350kg for bulls and 300kg for heifers. Two Limousin stock bulls cover all cows and both have strong terminal traits, but carry calving ease with it. Charolais bulls were previously used, but the last stock bull was not replaced.

The calving ease of the Limousin bulls has helped to reduce labour requirements at calving, with lively calves on the ground and few difficulties being experienced on the farm.

Charolais sires will be considered again if carcass and liveweight gains are negatively affected by the change in sire breed. Calving interval for 2014 was 366 days.

Spring-calving cows go to grass from late February and are moved to a rented outfarm where they are paddock-grazed until housing.



Bulls on Donie Ahern's farm have averaged 1.55kg/day from grass this year at a cost of 20c/kg.

Cows are weaned by forward creep grazing. Calves were creep fed from mid-September this year at a rate of 2kg/day.

Calves are weaned and meal feeding is continued into January at a similar rate. From late January onwards, meal feeding will stop and yearling bulls will start grazing from late February.

Bull finishing

Throughout the BETTER farm programme, the farms set up to produce 18-month-old bulls have generally been the most profitable.

Pressure on carcass specification from processors this spring has led to a number of farms moving away from their usual systems of bull production.

However, some farmers, who have developed close lines of communication with their processors, have been able to continue with grass-fed bulls after being given a firm indication that there will be a market for these animals.

The programme advisers have been extremely vocal on this point of action all year, as there was no benefit

in producing an animal that had no outlet.

Donie has continued his traditional finishing enterprise with bulls slaughtered at 18 to 20 months and heifers killed at similar ages. All cattle are finished through Kepak.

Carcass weight limits have come under pressure this year, with markets limiting carcass weights to 420kg for bulls. Heifers are finished at 310kg to 330kg carcass weight.

Weight gain from grass

Along with good genetics, the



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WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ This weekend will see the first paddocks closed up in preparation for an early spring turnout.
- ➔ Planning ahead has allowed farmers to have some drier fields to graze off now, so that they will be the first fields for grazing in spring.
- ➔ Ground conditions on heavier land require careful management after heavy rainfall this week.
- ➔ Cattle are being moved quickly onto the next grazing allocation to keep them settled.
- ➔ Meals are being offered to weanlings, especially strong bull calves, to keep them settled during wet spells.

➔ When de-horning autumn-born calves, it is an ideal opportunity to use a pneumonia and IBR vaccine. Intra-nasal vaccines can be given to calves from two weeks of age and should provide cover for the housing period.

TOP TIP

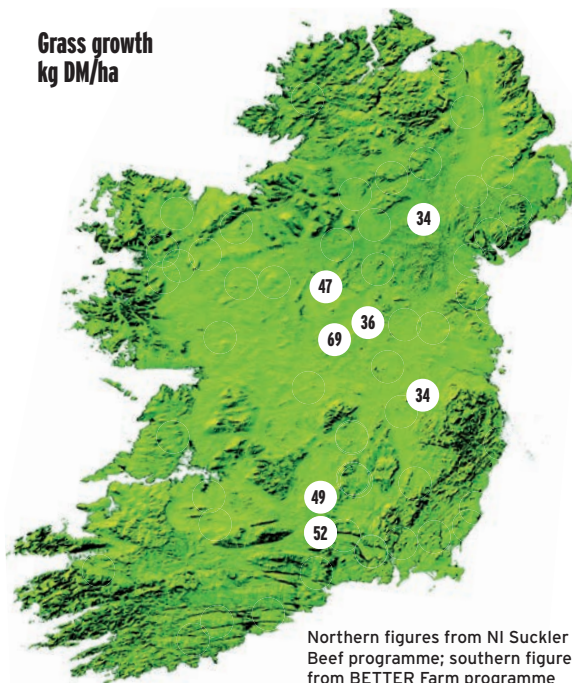
Grass growth
kg DM/ha

Table 1: Liveweight gain of cattle on Donie Ahern's farm

	4/4/14	5/7/14	13/9/14	30/9/14
Bulls (kg)	393	522	639	675
Av DLWG (kg/day)		1.43	1.72	2.12
	20/5/14	13/9/14	3/10/14	
Heifers (kg)	420	554	584	
Av DLWG (kg/day)		1.19	1.5	

short feeding period. With bulls having developed their frame at grass, they are fed a simple high-energy ration indoors to get them to the correct fat cover.

Bulls are offered 10kg/head of a barley and soya hulls ration costing €240/t. Straw is fed along with meal to provide roughage at 1kg/head. The finishing diet costs €2.47/head.

Bulls were weighed indoors and have gained 2.12kg/day from housing in mid-September with the group averaging 675kg liveweight on 30 September.

Taking a kill-out of 57%, bulls are gaining 1.2kg/day of carcass weight. At a beef price of €3.70/kg, the bulls are generating €4.44/day, which means they are covering their feed costs and fixed costs. However, such high levels of performance are only sustainable for a short period of time, typically 30 days maximum. After that, liveweight gains will decline.

Donie plans to market the bulls once they reach the required fat class for slaughter rather than holding them to keep increasing carcass weight.

The entire system is reliant on good grassland performance to stand any chance of making a margin on the bulls. Getting 250kg liveweight from grass on bulls before finishing is where the margins are made.

Adviser comment

Donie's farm system shows how cattle farms can benefit from getting an early turnout to maximise the amount of liveweight gain on animals. Consistently getting 250kg of liveweight on bulls over the grazing season at low cost means Donie is able to finish cattle indoors after a short feeding period. By keeping the finishing period short, there is a better margin being left on cattle.

Also, by keeping regular contact with his processor procurement agent, he is well aware of carcass weight limits and maximum slaughter age throughout the year, which means he can alter the system to meet the required factory specification on bulls.

— Alan Dillon,
programme adviser



FARMER FOCUS

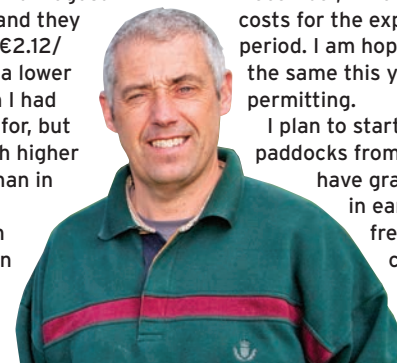
David Walsh
Co Tipperary

I started feeding 2kg to 3kg of meal to my store bullocks and heifers at grass on 1 September. These animals are spring 2013-born stock. I finished three steers and six heifers last week.

The bullocks averaged 320kg deadweight at 18 months with the heifers weighing 300kg at the same age. There are 21 of these animals to be sold off grass in mid-October.

The animals that are not fit for killing off grass will be sold through the mart. They should weigh 540kg to 550kg liveweight when sold.

I sold 10 of my heavier stores in mid-August in the mart and they averaged €2.12/kg. It was a lower price than I had budgeted for, but I had much higher weights than in previous years with all the gain achieved from



grass. The stores sold averaged 540kg.

All calves were weaned from early to mid-September. They were weaned in two batches by dividing them either side of the electric fence.

These calves have been on good-quality grass since then, so I stopped meal feeding after weaning. Calves are over 300kg liveweight and will be weighed in a fortnight. They got a vaccine for IBR before weaning.

I have used dry cows to clean out paddocks after weaning in a leader-follower system. They are in excellent condition and feed can be restricted before and during housing.

Last winter, I managed to keep cows out until early December, which reduced costs for the expensive winter period. I am hoping to do the same this year, weather permitting.

I plan to start closing up paddocks from 10 October to have grass available in early spring for freshly calved cows and some light yearlings.

Mike Dillane
Co Kerry

I sold 15 top-quality weanlings recently for live export. They were Belgian Blue-type animals and the pick of the calf crop born last autumn. The animals were sold at €3/kg at an average of 400kg liveweight.

There are 55 weanlings still on farm and, while quality is good, I felt they were maybe not suited to the export market. This was also being reflected in the price, which was too low in my opinion.

I was offered €2.20/kg in late August for 350kg bull weanlings. Instead, I will carry the majority of these weanlings on to finish as under-16 month bulls or 18- to 20-month-old heifers.

After doing out a few budgets, I reckon that my cost of keeping a cow on this farm comes in at around €750 to €800.

Therefore, selling light weanlings at poor prices is not viable for a profitable business.

Finishing the bulls added value to them

last year and, with bulls running 40kg to 50kg heavier than this time last year, hopefully I can do the same again.

I am breeding my own replacements this year, so I have 15 maternal heifers that will be culled around Christmas. They will be served with maternal sires to keep milk in the herd.

I killed the first lot of cull cows around late August. They were weaned in early July and received no meal at grass. The cows averaged 330kg carcass, with the majority hitting R grade.

The remainder of the cows to be culled will be weaned this week and fed 4kg to 5kg of ration at grass until slaughtered.

My finishing heifers are eating 4kg of ration daily now and I plan to have all of them finished in October at a target 320kg carcass.

For the next month, I am focusing on weighing calves, preparing for closing up paddocks from early October and, of course, calving is about to begin again.



big strength of the farm is the level of grassland management. Bulls are grazed in two-day paddocks.

Grass quality is excellent and cattle are consistently grazing covers of 1,000kg to 1,200kg DM/ha throughout the year. The farm has averaged over 12t of grass dry matter this year from approximately 100 units of nitrogen.

A group of 14 bulls born in spring 2013 went to grass from late February and these were weighed on 4 April. The group average was 393kg liveweight.

Finishing

Having harnessed high levels of liveweight gain from grass at low cost, the bulls are housed and finished after a