

BETTER farm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Sale weight determines weanling profit



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Late autumn is the time of weanling sales and a number of the programme farms are preparing their spring-born and last autumn-born weanlings for sale. In a weanling system,

weight for age is crucial. The calf has to generate enough income to cover its rearing costs and the cost of keeping the suckler cow.

The best and easiest way to achieve a higher sale price is to have heavy weanlings.

While lighter weanlings will have a higher price per kilogramme, it is irrelevant if the sale value is not high enough to cover costs.

Cover costs

For instance, a 300kg weanling could sell for €800, which is a sale price of €2.66/kg, yet the €800 may barely cover the

production costs, leaving little profit on the calf.

In contrast, a 400kg weanling could sell for €1,000, which is a sale price of €2.50/kg. The sale price of a heavier weanling will most likely cover all production costs and leave a greater margin on the calf.

The sale weight and sale value is more important than the price per kilogramme.

Likewise, the programme farms will average out the sales over all weanlings sold, as the best calves will command the highest prices, while the plainer or lighter

“The sale price of a heavier weanling will most likely cover all production costs and leave a greater margin on the calf

calves will be worth less.

To maximise sale weight, date of calving is important for weanlings, as April- and May-born calves will be too light for sale in autumn.

Where there are late spring-born calves on the programme farms, the

farmers are holding these calves over winter on silage and 2kg/day of ration and planning to graze them next spring before selling.

This way, the calves are sold at a heavier weight and the early grazing helps to get additional kilogrammes of cheap weight gain.

Calves that are being sold in autumn have been weaned well in advance of sale and calves are settled on meals.

Worming programme

In all cases, calves have been following a proper worming programme this summer and

some farmers have vaccinated calves against respiratory diseases, such as IBR and pneumonia.

This practice has helped to increase the sale value of weanlings compared with calves coming into the marts having been taken straight off of the cow. For instance, a number of weanling producers have repeat customers who now come directly to the yard to purchase calves as they know the animals have a good health status and proper weaning means calves thrive once they reach their new home.

ON THE GROUND GRAZING SEASON REVIEW

“Grazing ground yields 11.9t DM on BETTER farms”

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The grazing season is drawing to a close for 2014 and grass measuring has finished. Average grass growth over a 218-day season was 57kg DM/ha/day. In 2013, the BETTER farms averaged 50kg DM/ha/day. The effect of the weather was clear to be seen when comparing both years.

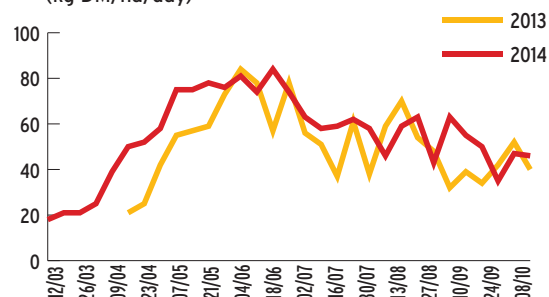
In terms of grazed grass yields produced, the farms averaged 11.9t DM/ha, which is roughly 24t/acre on a fresh-weight basis. This excludes any grass cut for silage. The longer grazing season increased grass yields by 3t/ha DM in 2014.

When compared with the 180-day grazing season in 2013, the farms would have produced 10.2t/ha of grass DM in 2014, which is still well ahead of the 8.9t DM produced last year.

Figure 1 compares grass growth in 2014 with 2013, while the four tables outline grass growth and yield on

Figure 1

Average daily grass on BETTER Farms 2014 v 2013 (kg DM/ha/day)



the programme farms that had weekly grass measurements for at least 75% of the grazing season and at least three readings per month.

Positive grass growth was being recorded from 12 March 2014, yet, in 2013, it was 16 April before positive grass growth was being recorded, albeit at low levels.

Spring

The BETTER farms had closed up grazing ground to start grazing from late February onwards. In most cases, turnout was delayed due to the heavy volumes of rainfall.

On/off grazing opportunities were also limited, as

ground conditions were waterlogged on many farms.

However, as March got under way, ground conditions gradually improved. Grass growth started off in March at an average of 18kg DM/ha/day, with the more southern farms having growth rates in the low 20s. The average growth rate highlights how important it is to plan for early turnout.

At a growth rate of 18kg DM/ha/day, growth would just about match the grazing demand of one 350kg weanling per acre, which is an adequate stocking rate for the time of year on typical clay land.

Therefore, it is important



Grass growth rates averaged 57kg DM/ha/day on the BETTER Farms in 2014 compared to 2013. The grazing season was typically 218 days compared to 180 days last year and grass yields were 11.9t compared with 8.9t DM/ha.

to have grass saved and to gradually filter cattle out to pasture as grass supplies and ground conditions allow to prevent running out of grass.

A dry, mild spell materialised in mid-March, which allowed farmers to get fertilizer and slurry on to land. This helped to drive growth rates and increase the turnout rate of heavier stores and spring-calving cows.

As March ended, fertilizer and temperatures of 11°C to 12°C brought average growth rates up to 25kg DM/ha/day, which could meet the grazing demand of land stocked at 500kg of liveweight per acre.

By April, soil temperatures were increasing quickly as weather conditions improved. By the end of the first week of April, the first grazing rotations were ending on farms that had stock out since 1 March.

Grass growth averaged 39kg DM/ha/day, with most

farms having applied 35 to 40 units of fertilizer as a combination of slurry and chemical nitrogen. This was capable of meeting stock demand and keeping cattle on a 21-day second rotation.

As Easter approached, grass growth averaged 50kg DM/ha/day, which was running ahead of grazing demand and grazing days ahead were starting to increase. Growth rates were at 58kg DM/ha/day by 30 April and grass surpluses were starting to build as the grazing demand for stocking rates of 1,700 to 2,000kg liveweight per hectare (one cow per acre) was 40kg DM/ha/day.

May/June

Although surplus grass was building, the programme farmers continued to spread another 20 to 30 units of nitrogen on grazing ground. Silage areas had been

closed in mid-April, so there was an opportunity to exploit grass growth and remove extra grass as silage, along with the main first cut in late May.

Weather started to break in early May, which made grazing more difficult. Some farms had a brief re-housing period for cows during very heavy rainfall. However, daytime temperatures were holding up and grass growth increased weekly to 78kg DM/ha/day around mid- to late May.

There was a clear divide in the programme farms, as those operating on drier land were able to harvest silage in late May and continue with grazing rotations of 14 to 18 days, which is ideal for the time of year.

However, in the northern and western half of the country, frequent rainfall delayed silage cutting and made grazing difficult.



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WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Programme farmers who produce weanlings are now selling calves in specialised sales and directly from the yard.
- ➔ The farms have set a target minimum weight for sale to ensure that they are selling weanlings that can generate a sale value high enough to cover costs and leave a margin.
- ➔ Lighter weanlings below this target weight will be wintered on silage and 2kg/day of meal and sold next spring off grass.
- ➔ Calves have been weaned well in advance of the weanling sales to maximise their sale value.
- ➔ Regular worming of weanlings and calves that are properly weaned has led to a number of repeat buyers sourcing animals directly off farm.

➔ Where possible, always try to house stock on a dry day. If stock are being gradually housed over a short period, reduce the stocking rate in cattle pens by spreading animals out over all pens in the house. They can be tightened up at a later date.

TOP TIP

Percentage of farm closed for grazing until spring

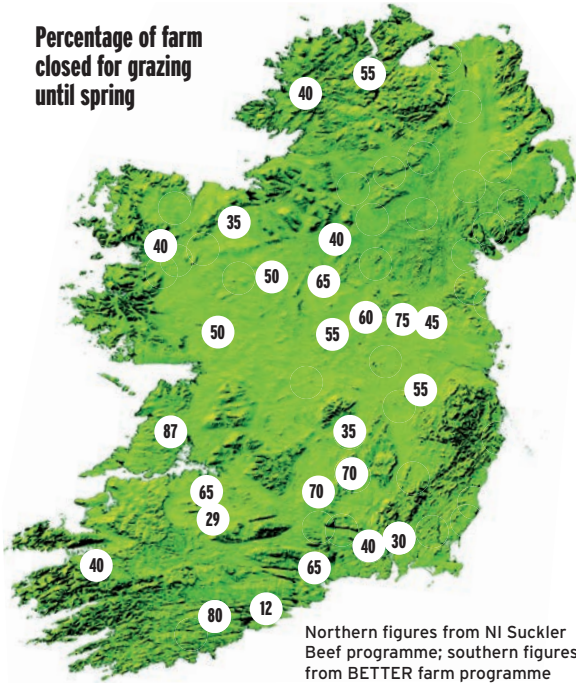


Table 1: Grass Growth and yield - region 1

Farmer	County	Avg daily growth 2014 (kg DM/ha/day)	Avg daily growth 2013 (kg DM/ha/day)	Grass yield 2014 (tonnes DM/ha)	Grass yield 2013 (tonnes DM/ha)
Mike Dillane	Kerry	47	51	9.9	9.2
James Kenneally	Cork	66	55	13.8	10
Ger Dineen	Cork	72	54	15.1	9.8
Donie Aherne	Limerick	54	57	11.2	10.2
Donal Scully	Limerick	64	78	13.4	14.1
David Walsh	Tipperary	62	59	13.1	10.6
Billy Glasheen	Tipperary	77	57	16.2	10.3
Mark Maxwell	Westmeath	57	55	11.9	10.0

Table 2: Grass Growth and yield - region 2

Farmer	County	Avg daily growth 2014 (kg DM/ha/day)	Avg daily growth 2013 (kg DM/ha/day)	Grass yield 2014 (tonnes DM/ha)	Grass yield 2013 (tonnes DM/ha)
Joe Murray	Roscommon	58	50	12.2	8.9
Charlie Crawford	Donegal	50	47	10.6	9.0
Billy Gilmore	Galway	42	43	8.9	7.7
Des Beirne	Longford	63	56	13.2	10.1
Chris McCarthy	Westmeath	51	52	10.1	9.5

Table 3: Grass Growth and yield - region 3

Farmer	County	Avg daily growth 2014 (kg DM/ha/day)	Avg daily growth 2013 (kg DM/ha/day)	Grass yield 2014 (tonnes DM/ha)	Grass yield 2013 (tonnes DM/ha)
Michael Smith	Cavan	55	-	9.8	-
David Mitchell	Monaghan	47	-	12.2	-

Table 4: Grass Growth and yield - region 4

Farmer	County	Avg daily growth 2014 (kg DM/ha/day)	Avg daily growth 2013 (kg DM/ha/day)	Grass yield 2014 (tonnes DM/ha)	Grass yield 2013 (tonnes DM/ha)
Tomas Murphy	Laois	62	53	11.4	9.6
Heinz Eggert	Kildare	42	48	8.9	8.7
James Madigan	Kilkenny	56	37	11.8	6.7
Patrick Drohan	Waterford	52	34	10.8	6.2
Patrick Grennan	Wexford	65	46	13.6	8.4
Trevor Minion	Wicklow	49	40	10.2	7.2

Silage crops were ready for cutting on most farms by the end of May, but were delayed due to weather.

Getting dry silage made was the number one priority, so wilting was not an option until early to mid-June when weather picked up.

Temperatures soared in mid-June and grass growth responded, despite having gone to seed on a lot of farms.

Average growth rates were 84kg DM/ha/day across the farms, but on individual farms, growth rates ranged

from 130kg DM/ha/on heavier farms that had plenty of soil moisture to 69kg DM/ha/day on farms with very light soils and starting to suffer from drought.

July/August

Grass growth always declines

from late June to late July, as the plant has produced a seed head and turned to stem.

Growth rates at the start of July dropped back to 63kg DM/ha/day, which was still well ahead of grazing demand.

Additional land was closed for hay and silage, while topping was required on lower-stocked farms to control grass quality.

With fertilizer applications being limited during the very hot spell in mid-July, grass growth remained static at 58kg DM/ha/day until early August.

Rainfall helped to replenish soil moisture levels and grass growth increased again to 63kg DM/ha/day and held at this level until September.

The farms in the more southern regions operating on light soils were suffering from moisture deficit in late August.

Meanwhile, on heavier land, growth rates were as high as 100kg DM/ha/day in late August.

Autumn

With good conditions in September and all silage ground available for grazing, fertilizer applications started to tail off.

Grass growth held at 50kg to 55kg DM/ha/day for most of the month.

With stocking rates down to 1,400kg to 1,700kg live-weight/ha due to the availability of silage ground, grazing demand ranged from 28kg to 34kg DM/ha/day.

Grazing days ahead were building week-on-week and this has now presented a major challenge to utilise all grass before closing again for winter.

FARMER FOCUS

Charlie Crawford Co Donegal

The good weather this summer enabled me to get all my second-cut silage harvested before the end of August and yields were excellent. I also harvested an extra 60 bales of silage from surplus grass.

I should have sufficient fodder in reserve for the winter, which is good, as I was tight for silage in the past with the extra cows and ewes. Silage samples have been taken and sent away for analysis.

The calves were weaned one month ago by removing a few cows at a time to reduce stress on the calves. Calves were getting 2kg/day of a barley/maize ration from three weeks prior to weaning.

I am planning to start selling the weanling bulls in the coming weeks.

Some of the lighter calves will be held until they reach the target sale weight of 400kg liveweight. They are thriving well and averaged 1.3kg/day



from birth to weaning.

My ewes are going to the ram in the next week. They are now getting priority for grazing the best quality swards which were reseeded in the spring. The reseeded swards are performing well.

Paddocks closest to the shed were closed first in the last rotation in order to have sheltered paddocks for the ewes with lamb in the spring.

I scanned the cows a month ago and had only one empty animal from 45 cows. This cow will be sold live. The cows are due to start calving from mid-November and will finish by late January.

Last year, I moved the calving back to November as only a few cows were calving in September and October. The tighter calving interval has given me a more even group

of weanlings for selling in terms of size and weight.

The replacement heifers are calving two weeks ahead of the main herd. So far, only two of the heifers have calved and they are doing well. The heifers were bred to easy-calving sires through AI.

James Strain Co Donegal

Heavy rainfall over the past week has made ground conditions difficult, so I housed five cows. Another five cows were housed as they are near calving. Another 14 cows will go inside at the weekend if they are starting to poach paddocks.

Eight heifers calved over the past fortnight. They calved at least two weeks before the cows. I find it is a huge benefit to calve them earlier than the cows, as they get more attention and more time to start cycling again. Their calves are bred from a maternal bull.

I was very lucky to have six heifers out of the eight calves. I intend to keep these heifers as replacements for the future. These will be kept at grass for as long as possible as I have plenty of grass available for them.

This year is the first time that I have autumn-calving heifers at 24

months. I am pleased so far with how well it has worked. An easy-calving bull has been a key part of the success. My main focus now is to get them back in-calf so they will calve again next year.

The oldest weanling bulls were sold five weeks ago at an average of 480kg. The remaining younger bulls are averaging 440kg. They averaged 1.6kg/day since their last weighing at the end of July.

I have plenty of grass to be grazed off, so I plan to keep weanlings at grass for another month, weather depending. There are six of the heifers born last year that I will keep for breeding. They will be put in-calf in January to calve down at 24 months next October.

The remaining heifers will be kept over the winter and I will sell them next summer.

They will be housed over the next few weeks.

I have started closing the paddocks closest to the sheds. The calves born now will have access to grass over the winter.

The calves will be much healthier when they can go outdoors.

