

Grass+ beef is powered by farmers in the BETTER farm Beef Programme

Grass+



# Conditions improve but growth slows

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**D**rier weather has led to a vast improvement in ground conditions in many parts of the country over the weekend and earlier this week. This has resulted in a big increase in the number of cattle turned out. Colder weather and frost have resulted in a dip in growth rates.

Some farmers on heavy land struggled with ground conditions up to early this week, and were only grazing the driest areas of the farms. If things continue to improve, they will graze off wetter areas so as to save drier ground for grazing if conditions worsen.

Priority stock and cows

with calves at foot have been turned out in many areas – the target in the programme is to graze out swards to 4cm in the first rotation, where ground conditions allow.

This is being done to ensure that regrowth is of the highest quality. Cattle are going into pre-grazing covers of about 1,500kg-1,600kg DM/ha (10cm-12cm).

In some cases, grass is being allocated on a 24-hour or 48-hour basis to ensure that utilisation remains high. Fertilizer is continuing to be spread on grazed ground at a rate of about 23-27 units N/acre.

Where lime has not been applied in the last six months, and where P and K levels are adequate, urea is being applied, where P and K indexes are low, compound fertilizers such as 24-2.5-10 and 27-2.5-5 are being used.

## KEY POINTS

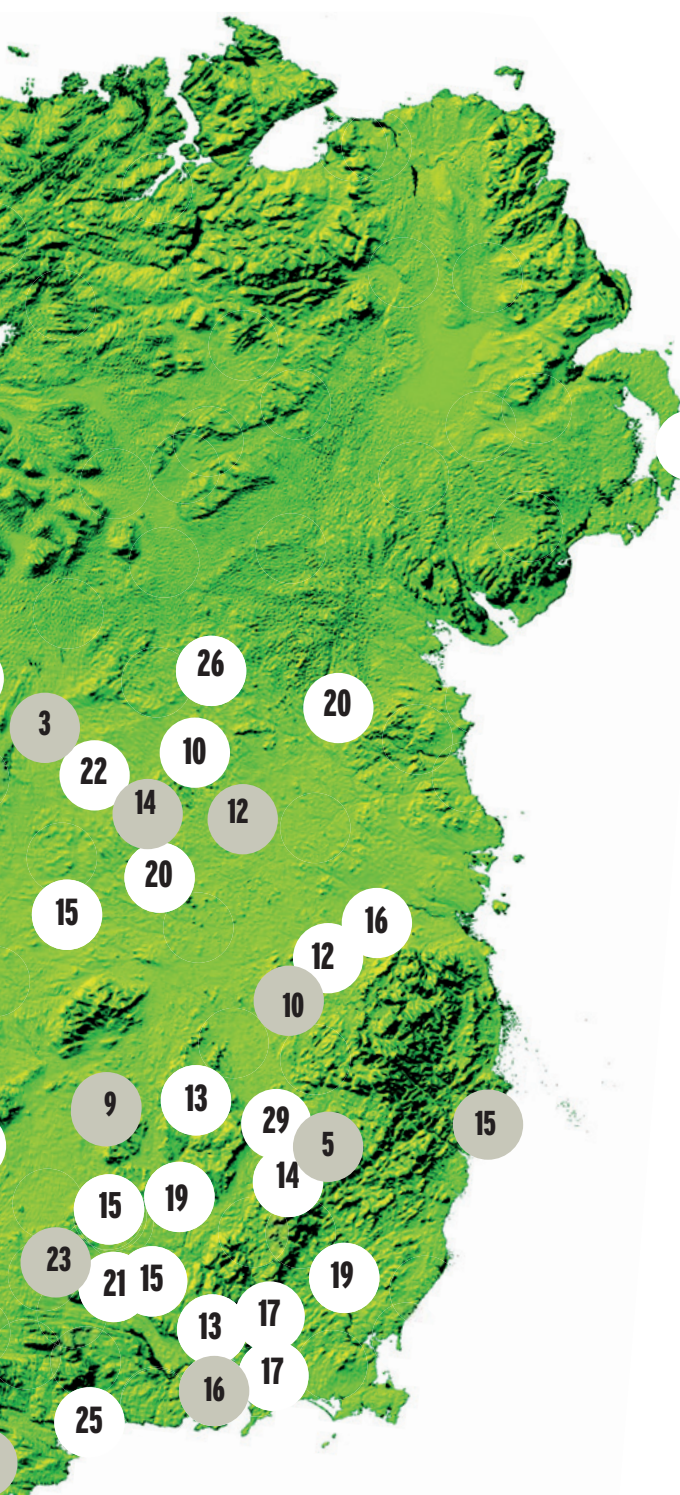
- ➔ Ground conditions have improved substantially in most areas.
- ➔ Farmers on wet or heavy land will graze off wetter fields while conditions are dry.
- ➔ Fertilizer is being applied after grazing at a rate of 23-27 units N/acre.
- ➔ There is a clear focus on grazing off silage swards prior to closing in early April.
- ➔ Calving is slowing down on many farms, with some farmers now focusing on giving the stock bull his N.

Most farmers in the programme have a target cutting date of late May or very early June. Over the course of the next three weeks, there is a particularly strong focus on grazing off silage ground prior to closing.

Once grazed off, most farmers will apply slurry at a rate of 2,500 gallons/acre and follow with fertilizer a week later.

Calving is progressing well across all farms, with many coming into the final stages of calving. Where stock bulls are used for breeding in spring herds, there is a clear focus on the bull's health.

The semen a bull uses when inseminating a cow is produced about 56 days earlier. For this reason the farmers are ensuring that bulls are on a rising plane of nutrition and they are free from any health issues.



**Donie Ahern**  
Co Limerick

Farming system	Suckler to beef
Land type	Heavy
Growth rate	(kgDm/Ha) 5
Avg farm cover	(kgDm/ha) 780

I have an average farm cover of 780kg DM/ha at the moment. Growth has been very slow, with only 5kg DM/ha recorded last week. Fertilizer has gone out recently at a rate of 30 units of urea per acre on 50 acres – this was spread in bare fields and fields with strong covers but yellow in colour in areas. I have also spread pasture sward at a rate of one bag/acre on 20 acres of land covered with lime in early February. So far, I have spread 2,000 gallons of slurry per acre on 37 acres of bare paddocks. I have 44 cows calved at the moment. I have 25 bulls, 10 heifers and 18 autumn weanlings out at grass since 2 February. Forty-one spring cows and calves have gone out in the last couple of weeks. I am block grazing covers to avoid poaching damage and will try to clean out paddocks better in the next rotation in April.



**Chris McCarthy**  
Co Westmeath

Farming system	Suckler to weanling/store
Land type	Dry, free-draining
Growth rate	(kgDm/Ha) 12
Avg farm cover	(kgDm/ha) 560

Improved weather conditions have made a huge difference on my farm. Growth rates were starting to increase, but the frost has slowed it again in recent days. In early February I spread 2,000 gallons/acre of watery slurry on paddocks with low covers. I am now blanket-spreading the whole farm with a bag of CAN/acre (27 units N/acre). Replacement heifers were turned out in early February and remain out grazing with their calves. They are doing very well, the heifers seem to have plenty of milk and the calves look like they are thriving. Ground conditions have improved in the past week and I am now able to graze out swards. The calving season is almost coming to an end. I had 90% of the cows calved within eight weeks. There have been few difficult calvings.



**Richard Williamson**  
Co Meath

Farming system	Suckler to beef
Land type	Free-draining, heavy
Growth rate	(kgDm/Ha) 10
Avg farm cover	(kgDm/ha) 680

To date, I have 17 cows calved out of 70. It's a little slower this year due to an issue with my stock bull last year, but I hope to get most of them calved in the next month as they are starting to spring down heavy. I have good grass covers – my average farm cover is 680kg DM/ha. I let the lightest weanling heifers out to grass on 12 February and all the yearling steers out on 6 March. My heavy heifers are still housed and I will try to get them out to grass this week. To date, I have 17 cows and calves and 77 weanlings out at grass. Ground conditions are improving, but I found it difficult to graze down tight during the heavy rain. I kept moving stock on to avoid poaching and will try get these paddocks grazed out on the next rotation. I plan on moving steers to silage ground this week. I'm aiming to close up for first-cut silage on 10 April.



**Liam McWeeney**  
Derrypatrick herd, Grange

Farming system	Suckler to beef
Land type	Dry
Growth rate	(kgDm/Ha) 10
Avg farm cover	(kgDm/ha) 625

We currently have 81 cows calved, which is around 80% calved in seven weeks. Thirty-one cows and calves were turned out on Monday of this week, with another 20 due to go out by the end of the week. Cows and calves were turned out into sheltered paddocks first and have free access to high magnesium buckets. We are a little behind target on our spring rotation planner. We currently have 20% of ground grazed – it should be closer to 40%. We will go into lighter covers for the next 10 days to speed this up. Increased numbers out grazing will help. Weanlings had to come back in for two weeks due to ground conditions, but were turned back out on Monday. We are aiming to graze as tight as ground conditions will allow in the first rotation and any paddocks not fully cleaned out in the first rotation will be grazed tight in the second one.

**Farm walk preview: how Waterford farmer Patrick Drohan has worked to improve output with some input from his Teagasc B&T adviser, Paddy O'Brien, and programme adviser, Peter Lawrence - BETTER farm >> 46**

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# BETTER farm Beef Programme



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## FARM WALK

PATRICK DROHAN,  
WATERFORD



### Nathan Tuffy previews next Tuesday's farm walk on Patrick Drohan's farm near Kilmacthomas, Co Waterford

Waterford farmer Patrick Drohan hosts the first BETTER farm walk of 2015 next Tuesday 24 March. Since joining the programme in 2012, he has been working towards achieving a gross margin of €1,000/ha.

The farming system operated has not changed since the start of the programme. The suckler to store system involves selling bullocks and heifers in autumn. All cows are spring-calving, with the target of having cows calved in a 12-week period from late January onwards.

The farm consists of 46ha, split into four different sections. The land is dry and free-draining, leaving it possible to extend the grazing season at both ends of the year.

The main focus has been to increase the stocking rate and cow numbers to improve farm output. Patrick has built up cow numbers by purchasing suckler cows and in-calf heifers and breeding from within the herd by keeping suitable heifers to calve at 24 months.

The extra stock was purchased from cashflow, which Paddy says has been difficult at times and slowed the increase in cow numbers slightly.

#### Increasing output

Since joining the programme, he has worked closely with his B&T adviser

Paddy O'Brien and BETTER farm adviser Peter Lawrence to increase farm output. In 2012, the farm had a stocking rate of 1.18LU/ha. In 2014, this had increased to 1.84LU/ha and the target is to increase this to 2.2LU/ha.

This year, Paddy aims to calve down about 50 cows, with numbers forecast to increase further to 55 cows next year.

"It is difficult to build numbers from within the farm while still culling cows. Over the past few years, we have completed the increase in numbers from cashflow. This put pressure on at times and required a lot of budgeting."

Traditionally, there were about 15 cows calving in November and December, with the remainder spring-calving. The decision was taken to move all calving to January, February and March.

In 2013, there was a major restructuring of the herd, with 29 additional cows and 10 in-calf Limousin cross Friesian heifers bought in. Fourteen cows were culled in 2013 due to poor fertility, low milk yield, not being in-calf and not calving in the designated calving pattern.

But 2013 also was a bad year in terms of mortality, which increased substantially to 20% by 28 days of age. This was not due to any specific health problems or underlying conditions, but due to a variety of reasons. It was deemed to be a particularly unlucky year. Due to



There are 25 cows and calves grazing on Patrick Drohan's farm. They will continue to graze paddocks bare while conditions allow.

that, output and gross margin suffered in 2014.

#### Grassland management

There has also been a strong focus on grassland management on the farm since joining the programme. Many of the swards would have been old permanent pasture.

Despite the farm being lowly stocked, Patrick has reseeded over 25% of it in the past two years and will reseed another 10 acres this year.

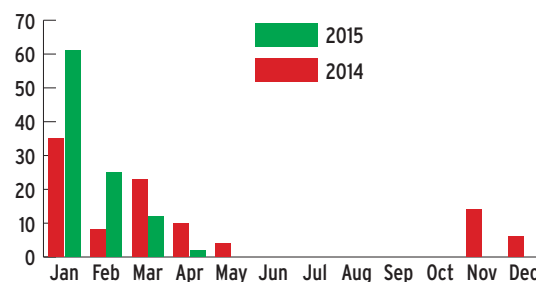
Soil fertility has also received a lot of attention. Soil samples were analysed when joining the programme, and a large proportion of the farm was low in P and K (Index 1).

The spend on fertilizer increased almost twofold over the course of the last few years, as additional P and K was applied to bring soil back up to the target index of 3 for P and K.

Patrick also spread lime on paddocks when he joined the programme. Approximately 2.5t to 3t of lime is applied at reseeding also.

Figure 1

Percentage of calvings per month 2014 vs 2015



#### Breeding

There is no AI carried out on the farm; all cows are served to either a Simmental or Limousin stock bull. The Simmental bull is used on cows suitable for breeding replacements, while the Limousin is used for his terminal traits and on heifers.

The calving pattern has changed substantially. The autumn herd has been moved to spring and 2013 was the last year where cows calved in November and December. Figure 1 shows the calving spread in 2014 vs 2015. This year there were 31 calvings in January, 13 in February and four so far in March.

Calving is expected to finish in April. It is hoped that next year, calving will take place over three months only.

Housing is an issue on the farm. As a result, there is a clear focus on turning cows and calves out to grass after they calf to relieve pressure on calf creep and calving facilities. "I would like to get to 60 cows, but at the moment I will focus on getting to 55 and steadying the ship," said Patrick.

Table 1 details the key calving trends in the herd over the past three years. As cow numbers were increasing and the calving pattern altering, the number of calv-

ings increased, as have the numbers of cows and heifers brought into the herd to boost numbers.

The calving interval decreased substantially from 441 days to 377 days through the addition of cows and heifers and removal of cows with poor fertility.

As mentioned earlier, mortality was an issue in 2012-2013, but recovered in 2013-2014. The number of calves/cow/year has increased as a result to 0.96 last year. This means that in the average 50-cow suckler herd, there are over eight calves more to be sold each year through the improved productivity of the herd.

This year, the bull will be put with the cows in mid-April to delay calving to 20 January. This will be done so that calving will coincide with increasing grass availability and take the pressure off housing.

#### Cattle performance

Steer and heifer weanlings were fed ad-lib 70 to 72DMD silage, along with 2kg concentrates/head. From November to January, the heifers grew at 0.7kg/day.

Last year's weanlings were weighed in November. The steers averaged 354kg at housing, having achieved a daily liveweight gain of 1.16kg since birth. The heifers weighed 342kg at nine months of age, having grown at 1.09kg/day since birth.

In early February, the steers averaged 428kg at 12 months of age, while the heifers weighed 403kg.

#### Patrick Drohan farm walk

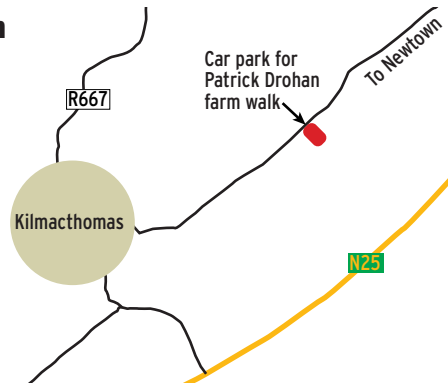
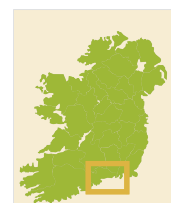


Table 1: Three year calving performance statistics

	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	National averages
Total no of calvings	37	58	49	
No of cows	32	45	39	
No of heifers	5	13	10	
Calving interval	441	370	377	412
Mortality at birth (%)	2.6	13.1	2	4.5
Mortality at 28 days (%)	5.3	19.7	3.9	5.6
Females not calved in period (%)	0	0	2	13
Calves per cow per year	0.81	0.84	0.96	0.79
Births with known sire (%)	100	100	100	61