

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

Grass+



# Growth low but clean-out good

**NATHAN TUFFY**  
**WESTERN LIVESTOCK**  
**SPECIALIST**

ntuffy@farmersjournal.ie

Continued cold weather has resulted in very low growth rates across most of the farms in the programme. On farms with high stocking rates, average farm covers are dropping quickly as a result.

However, with warmer weather expected in the coming week, an increase in grass growth rates is anticipated.

Growth in the past week ranged from 5kg DM/ha to 26kg DM/ha. Where slurry was applied in late January/early February, re-growth is coming, but slowly. As most of the farmers have slurry or fertilizer out on grazed

ground, these fields are set to take full advantage of improving growing conditions. With very favourable ground conditions, paddocks are being cleaned out very well in the past few weeks.

The stocking rate continues to increase on most farms across the programme. Once growth rates increase, depending on average farm covers, stock will be turned out and sheds emptied.

## Breeding season

Calving is now drawing to a close on most farms, and the current target is turning to the start of the breeding season.

Where calving is targeted to commence in mid-January next year, farmers will aim to let bulls out with cows from

the first week of April.

In some cases, farmers are considering having bulls fertility tested in advance of the start of the season to ensure bulls are fruitful. This will not guarantee that bulls will remain fertile throughout the season, but gives peace of mind that the bulls are fertile to start with.

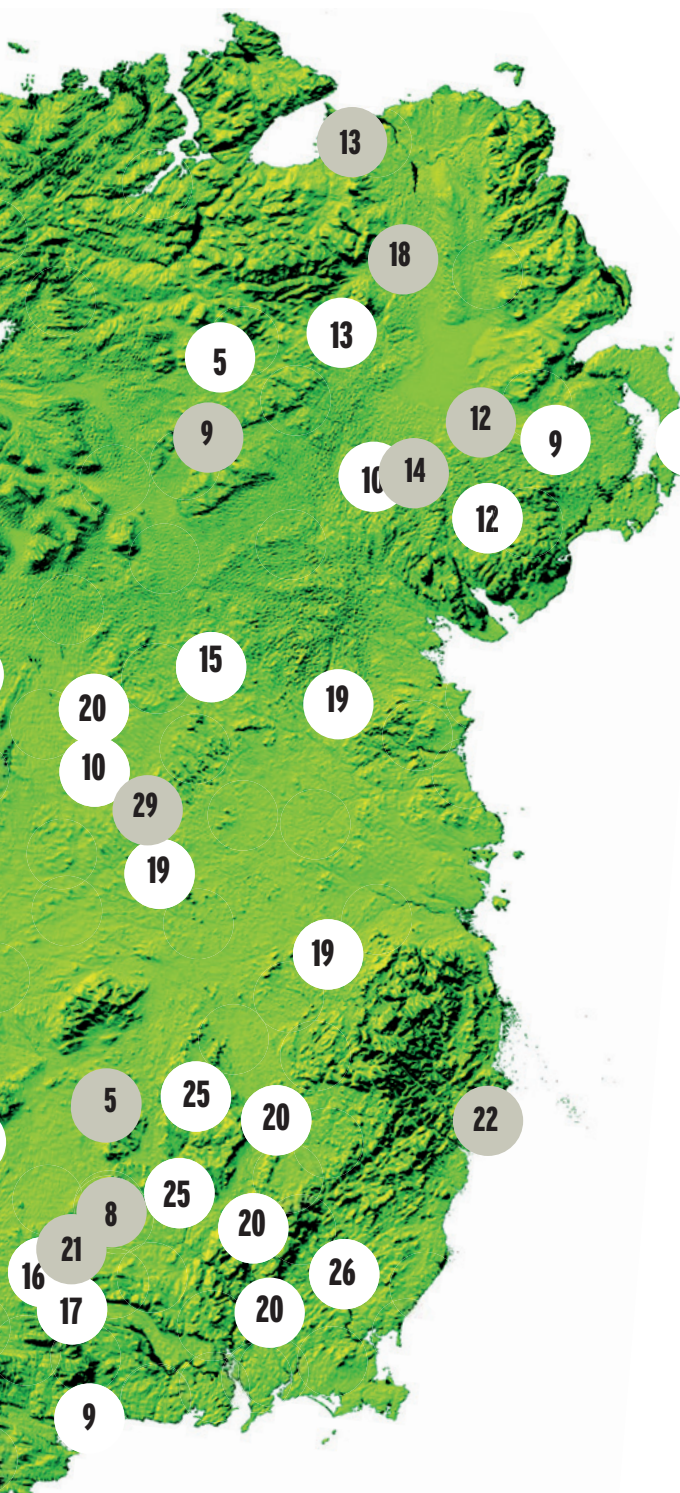
## Record keeping

The backbone of a successful breeding season is record keeping. Farmers in the programme will, in most cases, note down the details of each cow served and the date.

This can be useful in projecting calving date, but is also vital to assess the level of repeats within the herd. It can prove valuable if bulls become subfertile or infertile at any given time.

## KEY POINTS

- ➔ Growth rates continue to be low right across the farms in the programme.
- ➔ Stock continue to be turned out where grass supply allows.
- ➔ Paddocks are being grazed out to 4cm as ground conditions are firm.
- ➔ Breeding will commence in the next week for those targeting calving from mid January onwards.
- ➔ Having bulls fertility tested is being considered by some farmers for peace of mind prior to the start of the season.
- ➔ Records will be kept on cows served to identify repeats.



**Sean Power**  
 Co Kilkenny

Farming system	Store to beef
Land type	Dry
Growth rate (kg DM/ha)	8
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1,077

We turned out all 200 store heifers to grass starting in early March. We are planning to graze around 400 heifers at grass this summer. We are still trying to buy heifers, which is difficult with the very strong trade. We have around 80 still in the shed feeding and we will be selling those during the next few weeks. They are still on a finisher diet which is silage, fodder beet, concentrates and a small amount of straw.

We have 180 ewes and we have around 100 lambed so far. We have fenced the boundary of a 10-acre field on our home farm and we plan to sow typhon under-sown with grass seed for the lambs after weaning. We have also divided seven or eight of our largest fields with single-strand electric fencing.



**James Keneally**  
 Co Cork

Farming system	Suckler to steer
Land type	Dry
Growth rate (kg DM/ha)	5
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	237

My average farm cover is quite low at 237kg/ha. Last week's growth rate was 5kg DM/ha. I spread slurry across very bare fields in February and covered the entire farm with two bags per acre of 19-0-15 in early March. There are currently 10 cows and calves and four yearlings at grass. I will turn out the majority of my stock in the next week once my herd test is out of the way. Calving is almost completed, with 45 out of 48 cows calved and 44 live calves on the ground. Cow numbers are back slightly due to TB outbreaks last year, but I have bought in extra finishing stock to compensate. Silage ground is now closed up with the aim of cutting in the last week of May. I spread 2 bags of 19-0-15 on this per acre and will follow up with three bags per acre of CAN.



**Frank and Des Beirne**  
 Co Longford

Farming system	Suckler to beef
Land type	heavy
Growth rate (kg DM/ha)	26
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	815

Recent improved ground conditions have allowed us to turn out an additional 32 spring calved cows with calves at foot. A second group of bulls was also turned out on 12 March, as was a group of autumn-born bulls. They have been quite settled at grass since turnout.

Growth on the farm is starting to increase, despite cool nights. Approximately 15 units N was blanket-spread across the farm in early March, apart from areas of wet ground. They were spread with Nitrogen at the end of last week. We plan to blanket-spread the whole farm with about 35 units N at the end of March to try and push on growth rates.



**Billy Glasheen**  
 Co Tipperary

Farming system	Store to beef
Land type	Dry free draining
Growth rate (kg DM/ha)	5
Avg Farm Cover (kg DM/ha)	720

I have almost 53 head of stock at grass at the moment. My average farm cover is 720kg DM/ha which has dropped in recent weeks due to frost. I am currently stocked at 1.2 LU/ha but this will increase in the next week now that silage ground has been closed. Growth has been very poor lately, with only 5kg DM/ha recorded last week. I am getting quite tight on grass and have about two weeks silage left for the 73 cattle still inside. I am relying on a big pick-up in growth over the next two weeks to get me out of trouble. So far grazing ground has got 23 units of urea in February and is being followed up with 2,000 gallons of slurry or 40 units of Urea after each grazing. Silage ground has received 3,000 gallons per acre of slurry and I will follow this up with three bags of CAN.

**➔ We preview next Thursday's spring breeding walk on Donal Scully's farm in Limerick. In 2014 Donal achieved a gross margin of €1,374/ha in a suckler to beef system - BETTER farm >> 52**

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## FARM WALK

DONAL SCULLY,  
LIMERICK



### Nathan Tuffy previews Thursday's (2 April) farm walk on Donal Scully's farm near Banogue, Co Limerick

Donal Scully hosts the second BETTER farm walk of the year on Thursday 2 April. He farms 29ha near Croom, Co Limerick, running a suckler-to-beef system finishing heifers at 19 to 20 months and bulls under 16 months of age.

Over the past few years, he has been working at increasing the stocking rate and output on the farm. In 2011, the farm achieved a gross margin of just €461/ha at a stocking rate of 2.15LU/ha. Donal has increased the suckler herd to 42 autumn-calving cows, but has not increased it any more due to housing constraints.

However, he has focused on maximising the output on the farm through buying stock. Each January, approximately 15 weanlings are bought, which will be finished with his own under 16 months of age.

The reason for this is to increase farm output without putting additional demands on housing. The bulls are housed in August and finished indoors. It is only when the bulls are gone that the cows can be housed.

In addition to buying weanling bulls, he has also started to buy Limousin cross heifer calves from the dairy herd after consultation with his programme adviser Alan Dillon and local Teagasc B&T adviser Pat Blackwell.

Last year, 25 of these were bought, with the target of keeping some as replacements. The remainder will be sold off-farm.

The 25 Limousin cross calves bought last year had an average cost of €220/head. However, the cost of the same calf this year has increased by €100 to €140/head. Calves will be sourced in the coming weeks.

#### Pushing the stocking rate

Donal's farm can get tacky with heavy rain, but all in all, it is quite a dry farm. This has helped him to push the stocking rate limits of the farm. This year, he will be stocked to 3LU/ha for most of the year.

Good grassland management has been the key to being able to grow enough grass to feed all stock. Walking around the farm, the most striking thing is the number of electric fence reels used.

Donal allocates grass on a daily basis for each animal type on the farm. During poor conditions, he will even go as far as allocating grass on a 12-hour basis.

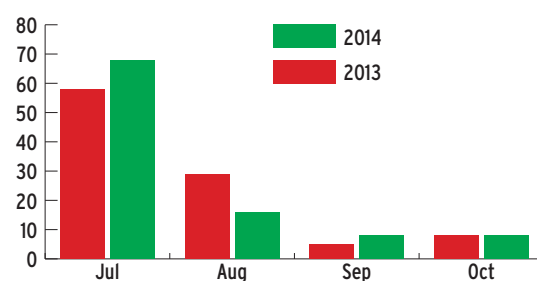
During the summer months, Donal usually runs up to five groups at grass. He acknowledges that this can be difficult, but finds that with good planning, the use of PastureBase and watching the grass wedge, it is quite manageable.

Last summer, the farm



Autumn-born bulls at grass on Donal Scully's farm. They were supplemented up to last week when meal was removed.

**Figure 1**  
Percentage of calvings per month 2013 v 2014



experienced significant drought through July and August. The shortage of grass meant the decision was taken to buy about 200 bales of grass silage.

As the bulls are housed for finishing in August, it takes pressure off grass demand. This coincides with calving, so the increasing demand for grass from the cows and calves is offset.

#### Breeding

Calving runs from July to October. However, almost 70% of cows are calved in the first month. Previously, the herd was served to almost all AI. Since 2013, Donal has used 100% AI for the first six weeks and a maternal Lim-

ousin stock bull with Ronnick Hawk bloodlines is used to mop up the herd.

In terms of cow breed, Donal said: "I don't mind what breed she is as long as she rears a good calf and goes back in calf."

The calving interval on the farm was 385 days in 2014 and 0.95 calves per cow per year was achieved. In previous years, the calving interval was closer to the target of 365 days. As with all the farms in the programme, there is a clear focus on trying to maximise the output from each cow.

In Donal's case, producing 0.95 calves per cow per year as opposed to the national average of 0.79 means that

he has €5,120 more output than the national average in his 40-cow herd, taking the average weanling value to be €800/cow.

Donal has focused on increasing the maternal characteristics of his herd over the past few years. The average maternal Euro-Star value of the herd is €168/cow.

Previously, all replacements had been bred from within the herd, although Donal admits that it is still difficult to breed enough replacements.

Last year, some Limousin cross dairy-bred heifers were bought in as calves and reared with the intention of using the best of them as replacements.

Despite using mostly maternal bulls on the cows, animal performance has not suffered. Last year, the bull calves averaged 1.3kg/day, while the heifer calves averaged 1.2kg/day up to weaning.

Last year, the bulls slaughtered under 16 months of age had an average carcass weight of 414kg, with a lifetime ration consumption of 1.3t/cow and calf unit.

#### Adviser comment

Donal has demonstrated how high stocking rates, excellent grassland management and time management can give a very good return from a part-time operation.

Fixed costs are low on this farm, with contractors used for the main jobs, such as silage and reseeding, which leaves Donal's time free to move stock and spread fertilizer.

This farm walk will demonstrate how to achieve high output without having to invest in major capital spending while delivering a very good return, both per hour worked and per hectare from a beef farm.

Along with breeding, the main areas Donal excels in are growing grass and utilising it to achieve very impressive growth rates in his stock. This will be demonstrated on the day.

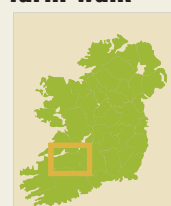
Donal's breeding policy will also be discussed and ICBF will be present to examine his Euro-Star rating.

Donal's farm system of finishing his own homebred and purchased stock to leave good margins will be discussed on the day also.

— Alan Dillon



#### Donal Scully farm walk



**Table 1:** Three-year calving performance statistics

	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	National averages
Total no of calvings	38	40	38	
No of cows	32	29	31	
No of heifers	6	11	7	
Calving interval	360	367	385	412
Mortality at birth (%)	2.6	0	2.6	4.5
Mortality at 28 days (%)	5.3	2.5	2.6	5.6
Females not calved in period (%)	0	0	0	13
Calves per cow per year	0.95	0.98	0.95	0.79
Births with known sire (%)	100	100	100	61