Autumn
Target the autumn to reduce beef costs

There is a lot of potential to make better use of grass on beef farms in autumn. Every extra tonne of grass utilised is worth €90/ha. Utilising extra grass and prolonging the grazing season should be your key objective this autumn.

The focus of autumn grazing management is to increase the number of days at grass and animal performance, but also to set the farm up during the final rotation to grow grass over winter and provide grass the following spring. There are two key Autumn periods:

- Period of autumn grass build-up.
- Managing the final rotation.

Generally, rotation length should be extended from 10 August. The focus of this period is to gradually build pre-grazing herbage mass, targeting covers of 2,000kg to 2,300kg DM/ha in mid-September.

Pre-grazing covers >2,500kg DM/ha are difficult to utilise and should be harvested as surplus (round bales). Surplus paddocks should be removed in August.

Removing paddocks after the first week of September should be avoided if possible; a September harvest is too late as paddocks do not have enough time to re-grow to make any meaningful contribution in the last rotation. By achieving the right farm cover at the right time, decisions are easier to make. Many farmers fall into the trap of building cover too late and are pushed into harvesting excess grass in September.

Autumn grazing management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DOs</th>
<th>DON’Ts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Build grass from mid August</td>
<td>Build grass from mid July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvest excess grass as bales in August</td>
<td>Harvest grass as bales in September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block graze the higher grass covers</td>
<td>Re-graze closed paddocks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graze cover &lt;2300kg DM/ha</td>
<td>Graze covers &gt;2500kg DM/ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have the highest farm cover in mid September</td>
<td>Have the highest farm cover in mid October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start closing paddocks in early October</td>
<td>Start closing paddocks in late October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan your closing rotation for the farm</td>
<td>Have no closing plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graze paddocks to 4cm</td>
<td>Graze paddocks to 5-6cm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grazing Guide
Autumn nitrogen applications
On beef farms, grazing stocking rates are quite varied but generally low, which has a huge effect on feed demand. As the nitrate directive deadline date for nitrogen application is 15 September, farmers must decide in late August/early September what level of nitrogen application they will apply to ensure sufficient grass growth for the final three rotations.

Farmers with a high grass demand in October/November, who have their nitrogen applications up to date by August, should consider applying a blanket application. The amount to apply may vary, and will depend on feed supply. Only blanket spread nitrogen if the farm is under target for grass. Spreading excess nitrogen in autumn is wasting money as the soil is naturally releasing nitrogen.

Soil temperatures stay quite high in September and grass responses per kg N of between 10kg to 15kg DM/ha have been recorded under good growing conditions. Obviously, swards with more perennial ryegrass will respond better to nitrogen and these should be targeted for building autumn grass.

Swards on a long rotation with nitrogen applied have the capacity to achieve grass growth rates of up to 40 to 50kg DM/ha/day through September and October.

**Autumn slurry**
Timing of slurry application has little effect on P and K utilisation from slurry, provided application does not take place in periods of heavy rainfall that might cause significant run-off losses.

Timing of application only has an effect on N availability due to ammonia volatilisation in warmer and drier weather.

Approximately 85% of the economic fertilizer value of slurry is due to its P and K content; 70% is K (about five units of P and 38 units of K per 1,000 gallons). Since application in autumn has little effect on P and K utilisation, most of the slurry value will still be utilised with autumn application.

The key issue with slurry at any time of the year is to spread on...
fields that need P and K. A question that farmers should ask themselves when spreading slurry is: “If I were not in the field today spreading slurry, would I have been here with a compound fertilizer?”

If the answer is no, then you are not getting the most from your slurry. The remaining 15% of the slurry value is the potential N fertilizer value.

With splash plate application, of standard 7% DM slurry, the general assumption is approximately three units of N per 1,000 gallons in summer, and approximately six to seven units in spring.

The N value is better in spring because of the lower N volatilisation losses due to cooler conditions. With weather conditions in autumn that are comparable with spring, the availability of slurry N should be equal in autumn as in spring.

The overall utilisation of N by the grass will fall with lower growth rates, and N mineralisation from the soil will probably be sufficient to meet N requirements.

This is usually reflected in higher N contents in autumn herbage and also by the fact that N fertilizer is not advised later than mid-September.

**Autumn/ winter grazing**

**AUGUST TO DECEMBER**

The aim of this period is to maximise the amount of grass utilised from September to December while, at the same time, finish the grazing season with the desired farm grass cover.

The farm grass covers or amount of grass grown over this period will depend on stocking rate, level of supplementation, autumn nitrogen and system of production (e.g. autumn calving suckler herd, bull beef, etc). The following guidelines should be used:

- Rotation length should be increased from 25 to 30 days in mid/late August to 35 to 40 days in late September.
**Last grazing rotation** should be 30 to 40 days with first fields rested from 10 to 15 October. Closing should be a week to 10 days earlier on heavier type soils.

**Choose drier fields, fields close to the yard or sheltered fields to close first so that they will be the first ones grazed in spring.**

**Close wettest paddocks next in the rotation followed by the remaining paddocks.**

**Aim to have 60% of the farm grazed by the first week of November with the remaining 40% grazed by early December (these dates change, depending on location).**

**Aim for an average farm cover of 7cm to 8cm (1,000kg DM/ha) by late September.**

**Pre-grazing yields should not exceed 11cm to 13cm (2,000kg to 2,300kg DM/ha) and should be adjusted downward for wetter type soils.**

**Very high pre-grazing yields will result in poor pasture quality and poor utilisation by the grazing animals.**

**Avoid grazing very large pre-grazing yields in last rotation (>13cm; >2,500kg DM/ha). As well as the problems outlined above, high pre-grazing yields in the last rotation have been shown to have a very detrimental effect on subsequent winter/spring grass growth.**

**Pastures should be grazed well in the last rotation to encourage autumn/winter tillering. Aim for a residual of 100kg DM/ha (4cm high) in fields as they are closed. Use younger or lighter animals or dry cows to achieve this residual in wetter conditions.**

**Closing grass cover in early December should be, on average, 5cm to 6cm (500kg DM/ha) with paddock pre-grazing yields ranging from 4cm to 8cm (200kg to 800kg DM/ha).**

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The map shows the closing strategy for a group of weanlings. The first paddock will be closed by 15 October. Sixty per cent of the farm is closed by 4 November. One hundred per cent of the farm is closed by 19 November.
The pictures show a paddock that has a cover of 2,500kg DM/ha. This is the maximum pre-grazing yield that should be grazed during the autumn period.

The ideal post-grazing height during the final grazing rotation is 4cm (on right). This will ensure that light can get into the sward over the winter, which will encourage tillering (or thickening of the sward). The paddock in the picture on right was grazed to 4cm. It is clear from the picture that there is very little left to get and that even the dung pads have been lightly grazed.

The table below shows some of the target farm covers that need to be achieved during the winter months. If farms are not stocked at 2.5 LU/ha, or if they are situated in slower grass growing or heavy soil areas, the values will have to be changed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month (on grazing area) (LU/ha)</th>
<th>Stocking rate (kg DM/day)</th>
<th>Growth (kg DM/day)</th>
<th>Target average farm cover (kg DM/ha)</th>
<th>Target cover per LU (kg DM/LU)</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aug 15</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>848</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>Peak cover achieved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 15</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>1130</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>First paddock closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 10</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>1050</td>
<td>424</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 15</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>Everything housed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 30</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>224</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These figures will have to be adjusted if the farm is not stocked at 2.5 LU/ha. For a farm stocked at 1.5 LU/ha reduce by 25%.
In the final grazing rotation paddocks should be grazed down to 4cm
Autumn

60:40 rotation planner

Grazing Guide
The autumn rotation planner is a tool to help extend the grazing season into late autumn and, if followed, it will ensure that paddocks are set up correctly for grazing the following spring. The 60:40 plan is based on having proportions of the farm closed by certain dates. These dates will vary slightly across the country and depend on soil type and the amount of grass that is likely to grow over the winter.

The 60:40 autumn rotation plan will not tell you if you are grazing paddocks that have too much grass and it will not tell you if you are not achieving desired post-grazing residuals. You will have to gauge that by walking through your paddocks or fields and assessing either visually or by measuring.

The objectives of the autumn rotation planner are:

- To keep grass in the diet of the cattle for as long as possible.
- To set up paddocks for grazing the following spring.

The simple rule is:

**Dry farms** – start closing 10 October; 60% of the farm grazed by first week November; remaining 40% grazed by 1 December.

**Heavy or slow grass growing farms** – start closing 1 October; 60% of the farm grazed by 20 October; remaining 40% grazed by mid-November.

Figure 1 shows the difference between a dry farm (closing 10 October) and a heavy farm (closing 1 October). For a dry farm, 60% should be grazed within four weeks and the remaining 40% in the next four weeks. On a wetter farm, this changes to 60% grazed in four weeks and the remaining 40% in three weeks.

In practical terms this means that priority animals are housed first and those that are not being finished are maintained at grass. Over time, groups of animals can be housed, reducing the number of animals at grass.
### Table 1
Area available for grazing each week this autumn

**Farm size:** 20ha  
**Closing Start Date:** 10 October

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>40%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>3 November</td>
<td>1 December</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of days from start to 60% date</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of days from 60% date to housing date</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of days</td>
<td>24 (a)</td>
<td>28 (c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.6 X total area)</td>
<td>(0.4 X total area)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hectares to be grazed</td>
<td>12 (b)</td>
<td>8 (d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b ÷ a) x 7</td>
<td>(d ÷ c) x 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha/week</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Blank worksheet

**Farm size:**  
**Closing Start Date:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>40%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>(d ÷ c) x 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha/week</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2
Autumn grazing planner showing weekly targets (from Table 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Grazing area</th>
<th>Actual area grazed weekend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>per week</td>
<td>Grazed (total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th – 17th Oct</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17th – 24th Oct</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24th - 31st Oct</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31st Oct – 7th Nov</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th – 14th Nov</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14th – 21st Nov</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21st – 28th Nov</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<td>24th - 31st Oct</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31st Oct – 7th Nov</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th – 14th Nov</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14th – 21st Nov</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21st – 28th Nov</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Getting meal feeding right at grass

While the focus of good grassland management is on maximising gain from grass, meal feeding at grass still has an important role to play in maximising output. It is important that meal is introduced at the correct time, fed at the right level and to the right type of animal to maximise return on investment.

**Weanlings being held over the winter**

Meal feeding levels: 1-2kg per day depending on grass quality and weather

On suckler to beef farms where weanlings are being carried through the winter there is little point in pumping meals into calves at weaning. On these farms the focus should be on making sure there is an adequate supply of grass on the farm to carry weanlings through until housing. During the weaning process both bull and heifer calves should be fed 1kg per day of a standard 12-14% ration for the 42-day period required under the SCWS scheme. Where grass supplies are tight and weather conditions are poor this should be increased to 2kg per day and maintained right through until housing. Certainly there is no justification on a suckler to beef farm for introducing a creep feeder and feeding meals ad-lib. The only exception would be where bull calves are intended for finishing out of the shed at 14-16 months.

**Heifers for sale post weaning**

Meal feeding levels: 1kg increasing to 2kg per day through until sale

Feeding ad-lib meals to the heifer calves, unless they are exceptionally well-muscled, will only result in them laying down fat around the tail head. Live exporters or the domestic trade do not want these puppy-fat heifers and therefore you will rule yourself out of vital sources of competition. In general, heifers should be fed 1kg per day for the four weeks prior to weaning, increasing to 2kg per day from weaning through until sale. Where grass supplies are tight post weaning and weather conditions are poor, this could be increased to 3kg per day, but only where heifers are well-muscled. You will need to keep an eye on condition score. If you see heifers starting to become too fat then reduce meal feeding. If planning on stepping up to 3kg per day you should feed a ration similar to that recommended for bulls on ad-lib meals.

**Getting meal feeding right at grass**

While the focus of good grassland management is on maximising gain from grass, meal feeding at grass still has an important role to play in maximising output. It is important that meal is introduced at the correct time, fed at the right level and to the right type of animal to maximise return on investment.
Bulls suitable for export
Meal feeding levels: Ad-lib (4-5kg/day) through to sale
Feeding ad-lib meals to top quality bulls six to eight weeks pre-weaning is an option where bulls are being sold post-weaning, especially if grass quality is poor or limited. Top-quality bulls will continue to develop muscle as opposed to laying down fat. Therefore, you will benefit from a heavier weaning weight but also improved conformation. It is important to select a balanced ration. The total intake of bulls will depend on age and weight. Six to seven month old bulls will eat 3kg to 4kg meals per day when offered ad-lib. This totals 120kg to 160kg per head over six to eight weeks. Assuming a conversion rate of 5:1 (i.e. 5kg of meal to 1kg of liveweight gain), this level of feeding will increase the weaning weight by 25kg to 35kg. As the quality of animal reduces the economics of feeding above 1kg to 2kg per day are questionable. Only bulls that will deliver a return should be fed ad-lib.

Bulls for domestic market
Meal feeding levels: R+ bulls fed ad-lib for a period of eight weeks, plainer quality bulls fed 1-2kg per day for duration of weaning period.
Second-grade bulls will still benefit from ad-lib meal feeding. However, the economic return will not be as high, mainly because each additional kilo of liveweight gain will be of a lower value compared to export-quality calves. Meals can be fed ad-lib to R+ continental bulls for the weaning period, provided they are going to be sold within four weeks of weaning. Where calves are going to be retained on-farm for six-to-ten weeks after sale, introducing the creep feeder should be delayed until weaning. Feeding ad-lib to plainer quality calves should be avoided. These animals will tend to become too fat and the economics are questionable due to poor conversion rates and the lower price per kilo. Feed a standard mix at a rate of 1kg for the duration of the weaning period, increasing to 2kg if grass supplies are tight.

Beef animals
Meal feeding levels: 2-3kg in early summer. 3-4kg in Autumn rising to 5-6kg if grass limiting or weather poor
Before introducing meals, separate the cattle you intend to finish off grass from those that will need to be housed and finished over the winter. At grass meals should be introduce from six to eight weeks pre-slaughter. The level of meal fed will depend on grass quality, grass availability and the amount of cover required to achieve a suitable fat score. In early summer, 2kg to 3kg per head per day is adequate. However, as you move into the autumn and grass quality declines, increase supplementation rates to 3kg to 4kg per day. Where grass quality is poor or in short supply, you will be forced to increase the meal allowance to 5kg to 6kg per day. Also, if ground conditions are poor, you should consider housing; there is no point holding cattle that you intend to slaughter off grass out on bare pasture unless they are being heavily supplemented.
From the middle of September, grass growth rates usually begin to decline rapidly and demand for grass on the farm is higher than daily growth.

Where covers of grass have been built up since August, there should be a bank of grass available for grazing for the remainder of the season, along with whatever grass grows each day. The questions then are:

What is the best strategy for using this autumn grass?

Which stock should it be given to and which should be housed?

What group of cattle on the farm should be the last to be housed?

Most beef farmers will not be considering housing any of their
Autumn

Grazing Guide
cattle in September as they are not operating high stocking rate systems and can afford to leave all their stock grazing until at least October. However, there are exceptions, especially when it comes to cattle that are within three to five months of finishing.

While there may still be quite a bit of grass available for grazing in September, the question that has to be answered is whether or not the grass has enough energy even with supplementation to finish cattle in a short period of time? Heifers and two-year-old bullocks that are very close to finish (no more than six weeks of feeding) may stay at grass with 3kg to 5kg of meal to finish them, as housing them will only set them back a month.

Certain groups of stock which are not going to finish off grass may be candidates for housing in September. For example, autumn born Friesian bulls that need to be slaughtered by their 16th month would, in most cases, benefit by being housed and built up on to their finishing ration sooner rather than later in the month. Similarly, heifers or bullocks that need to be finished for the Christmas trade would also need to be housed in September.

Older bulls from either the dairy or suckler herd (18 to 20 months) start to become very restless and aggressive as they get older and if they are not filling their bellies with grass, this misbehaviour only gets worse as the month progresses. Housing is the only option.

For all these groups, whether they are housed early in September or later, will depend very much on what grass is available and the weather conditions. Leaving large numbers out that should really have been housed can have a huge demand on grass and if it is left too late it can leave very little for the remaining stock at grass. This can then lead to the remainder being housed much earlier than planned. Wet weather, of course, is a deal breaker in September and should mean pulling the plug on those cattle that need to be housed if they are to be finished in time.

**CREEP GRAZING**

Many spring calving suckler herds are not weaning their calves until well into October. It is difficult to know whether or not the calf is benefiting from the milk it is getting from its mother at this stage, especially with January to March born calves. What we know, however, is that the cow still has a huge intake of grass while, at the same time, she is no longer producing a significant amount of milk. It makes sense, therefore, to limit the quantity but, more importantly, the quality of grass that she is getting compared with the amount her calf is getting.

The only way to do this without weaning them is to creep graze the calf ahead of the cow and this should begin as soon as possible. The benefits of creep grazing are many:

- Calves get priority access to the best quality grass which helps to maintain performance.
- With calves having an adequate supply of quality grass, less meal is required, giving a cost saving on feed.
- Calves get used to grazing away from cows which helps to reduce the maternal bond between cow and calf, leading to reduced weaning stress.
It is cheap to operate – it can be done by installing a creep gate or by raised electric fence.

It facilitates meal feeding. Meal can be fed in troughs in the creep grazing paddock and rationed to animal requirements.

All calves can be observed meal feeding, which aids the detection of diseases such as pneumonia.

**Closing**

October is the month when farmers need to start closing some of the farm so that they have grass built up to graze early in the new year. This does not mean that all of the stock on the farm have to be housed at the same time. A proper rotational grazing system allows for small areas to be closed. However, it concentrates the number of cattle that are left out on the remaining ground to be closed, which is shrinking by the week.

Decisions have to be made as to what stays out and what is housed. It is also important that all of the farm is grazed before the last of the stock are housed, especially if there are heavy grass covers in some fields. These can be a problem later in the autumn if the weather turns very wet and ground conditions are not suitable for grazing.

It is a balancing act to make sure you only leave out stock that can stay out for a long period to reduce the length of the winter but you also leave out enough of the right type of stock so that all grass is grazed before closing permanently.

Heavy cattle that are to be finished over the winter are the prime candidates for housing first. This is because they have a big demand for grass and removing them considerably lessens the grass eaten daily on the farm.

In many cases they are not yet on meal as they are going to have a five to six-month winter indoors. Their performance on grass alone is often less than 0.5kg LW per day and housing them onto their finishing diet pushes their daily gain up over 1kg LW per day.

As they are heavy, they can also do a lot of damage or soiling of whatever grass is remaining if there is a wet period of any length. Aim to keep them at grass until at least the middle of October. Where land is dry, weather conditions are good and there is still plenty of grass to be eaten, their housing date can be delayed until the last week of October.

**November**

On most beef farms, November will be the last month for cattle grazing, unless the weather remains very dry and there are still very heavy covers of grass to graze. With 60% of the farm closed by the middle of the month at the latest, this leaves just 40% to be grazed out. At that stage it is usually either dry suckler cows or weanlings that are still at grass.

Being lighter, the weanlings will do a lot less damage to ground in wetter conditions and are probably the best candidates for housing last. Also, dry suckler cows need a certain level of body condition at housing so that they can lose some weight over the winter on either a lower energy winter diet or by being fed less to save on winter feed. They cannot lose too much condition before they are housed.

Aim to have all of the farm grazed before the last group of cattle are housed.
The thoughts of wet weather and poached paddocks can stop farmers keeping animals grazing late into the autumn.

The main requirement for autumn grazing is a flexible attitude. Farmers should not be fearful of grazing animals into the autumn as they can be housed if soils get too wet. Any increase in the proportion of grass in the diet will pay dividends.

Block grazing and back fencing are as important in autumn as spring, especially when grazing higher covers (i.e. greater than 1,800kg DM/ha). Dividing a paddock up and moving animals once a day is probably the best way of utilising grass in autumn. It is better to move the animals at the same time daily; otherwise, they will expect to be changed every time they see a person.

The diagram shows three of the main methods of dividing larger fields into grazing divisions. They are:

- **Strip grazing**
- **Spokes of a wheel**
- **Block grazing.**

On/off grazing has been successfully used on beef farms to retain animals at pasture during periods of heavy rainfall.

On/off grazing is where the animals are let out to grass with an appetite (feed is restricted when indoors), they then graze continuously and are removed from the paddock when finished grazing (this is when you see animals start to lie down or walk about) and brought back to the shed.

This minimises soil damage, encourages good grass regrowth and ensures that grass is being well utilised.
To managing a wet autumn

1 A flexible attitude – don’t allow poaching.

2 Use most sheltered and driest paddocks when grazing in wet weather.

3 Strip grazing or block grazing can be used during wet weather to ensure minimal damage from poaching. Use one section per day to get the most from the grass.

4 Where possible, use a back fence. This will help to protect regrowths and prevent soil damage.

5 On/off grazing can be practised to reduce poaching damage and keep animals at grass for longer.

6 Have multiple access points into a paddock so that grazing animals do not have to use the same entrance. If you don’t, create a 4ft to 5ft grass roadway on a fence line to get animals to the back of the paddock.

7 Strategically place water troughs in the paddock so that they will service several strips or blocks when a strip wire is being used.

8 Graze paddocks with heavy covers from the back of the paddock on the sheltered side.

9 Change grazing break daily or every two days.

10 Change animals at the same time; give them a routine.