

How you can grow more grass?

Grazed grass is, and will continue to be, the cheapest animal feed for meat and milk production in Ireland. Your land's ability to produce excellent quality grass is your primary competitive advantage over other EU dairy farmers. To optimise profitability, producers must maximise the proportion of grazed grass in animal's diet.

What are the key factors in relation to grassland management?

Key performance indicator

A grazing season of 280+ days will maximise your profitability and competitiveness

- Grass budgeting is an essential tool in achieving a 280+ day grazing season.
- Increase farm profitability by increasing the proportion of grazed grass in the animal's diet.
- Graze paddocks to 3.5cm post grazing height in early spring to condition swards for subsequent grazing rotations.
- On/off grazing is one strategy to increase the proportion of grazed grass in the animal's diet during periods of wet weather.

Key facts

- Increasing the proportion of grazed grass in the diet of a dairy cow by 10% reduces costs of production by 2.5 cent/litre (2011).
- Every extra tonne of grass DM is worth in the €110/ha to a drystock farm (2015)
- Increasing the grazing length by 30 days will reduce costs of production by 1 cent/litre (2015).

How to maximise the proportion of grazed grass in your herd's diet

- Extend the grazing season in early spring and late autumn
- Start to close paddocks from 5-10 October.
- Close the farm in rotation.
- Target 60% of paddocks closed by 1-7 November. High percentage on heavier stocked farms
- Don't regraze closed paddocks.
- Target a closing farm cover of 550kg DM/ha when stocked at 2.5LU/ha.
- Use on/off grazing during periods of challenging weather.

Ensure your cows' calving pattern is matched to the start of the grass growing season

- Begin calving at the onset of grass growth. Typically this should result in most calves being born between 10 February and 1 March (six weeks before 'magic day').
- Target an opening farm cover of 700-800kg DM/ha. Higher opening cover on farms stocked >2.5LU/ha
- Use spring rotation planner on PastureBase Ireland and stick to daily area allocations as planned.
- Graze 30% in February, 66% by 17 March and target 100% grazed by 6 April (adjust these dates for later turnout regions).

Match your stocking rate to the growth potential of your swards

- Ensure perennial ryegrass dominates all swards.
- Target farm DM production of 15/16t DM/ha.
 - Stock the farm to its grass growth capability. e.g. 5t grass dry matter consumed per cow, grass yield 14t/ha = 2.8 cows/ha.

Maximise the productivity of your swards through improving soil fertility

- Soil sample one third of the farm each year. If there has been no sampling for many years consider getting the whole farm sampled.
- Apply P, K and lime as recommended.

Maximise the productivity of your swards through timely reseeding

- Reseed in spring if possible.
- Target a 60-day turnaround time from seeding to first grazing.
- Ensure that recommended list varieties are used.
- Use a post-emergence spray at the two-leaf regrowth stage.
- Graze the sward for the first time at 600-700 kg DM/ha.

Make use of farm grass cover measurement and grass budgeting

- Feed concentrates/high quality silage when short of grass.

Ensure that farm infrastructure is sufficient to fully utilise the grass grown

Feed concentrates/high quality baled silage when short of grass

Key performance indicator

- You cannot manage something you do not measure! You must be able to estimate grass covers in each individual paddock on the farm and use this information to achieve both short daily and medium term (weekly and monthly) targets that are critical to the success of the system. Such skills can be learned from advisers, through farm discussion groups and through practice and self-training.