

HSP Advisors assessment of 2017 Grazing Year

Ciara O'Shea - Teagasc Advisor, Macroom

Within the Macroom heavy soil area the 2017 year went reasonably well overall. However, it was a slow start in the spring with difficult conditions, as some farms didn't get as much grazed as they would have liked. Fertiliser was out early on farms in January but turnout date for the cows was delayed by a week or more. Yet, when cows got out they kept going and grazed very well.

The summer was a steady grass growing season and the response to fertiliser was great. Grass supply was just right which was easy to manage, however in April / May some farms were a bit scarce for a short while. When the rain came it was welcome, yet happy to be gone again soon after.

Silage on some farms got wet when cutting in May and delayed by a week or more to late June to get reasonable dry weather. The weather broke for both first and second cuts on some farms, so with the wet weather and delaying the cutting some of the results of this silage show 64-68DMD quality. On the other hand there was no damage done to ground.

During the autumn, September was marginal for grazing. Actions of back fencing 12 hour blocks, 3 hour grazing, on/off grazing and cow paths were used to get out to graze. Closing covers was going good up to October until the weather broke. In October there was not a lot of grass grazed. Farms had to budget to finish by early in November.

The average farm cover is favourable for most farms with the cover carried through the winter. However there are some paddocks that have a heavy covers and would have liked to be grazed but was difficult to achieve after the Storm Ophelia.

The thoughts of silage reserves could have been an issue during the Storm Ophelia as cows had to be housed. Farmers were thinking it was going to be a longer winter. The change in weather was welcome as cows were able to get out grazing, either fulltime or out by day. Now farmers feel they should be ok with the reserves left with having got out to grass, yet this will all depend on how the spring will come, and if they will be able to get out to grass early next year.

Overall a reasonable good year and hopefully next spring will be good to get out early.

James Dunne – Teagasc Dairy Advisor Cavan

Spring 2017 went reasonably well with grazing conditions better than normal due to lower levels of rainfall recorded compared to the average for Cavan. Growth rates were very good, with 43kg DM/Ha/day recorded on the demo farm in Stradone for the week ending 23rd April. First cut silage was made earlier than normal on some farms with exceptional growth witnessed in May combined with perfect cutting conditions weather wise. For the farmers who didn't get to avail of the good

conditions in May, cutting was delayed at the start of June due to poor weather. This had an adverse effect on silage quality but also on any planned second cut silage, any second cuts that weren't made before the second week of August were extremely difficult to save as high levels of rainfall and poor ground conditions started to take its toll. In the majority of cases these crops were got harvested at a later date but in some cases on exceptionally heavy farms, parts of or the entire crop has not been harvested.

Heavy farms in the region had to house cows by night from mid-September and as the rain continued to fall a number of these heavy farms had to house cows full time from late September on. Opportunities to get cows back to grass were limited on these farms and when the weather did allow it may have only been for a short period of time. As a result it reiterates the need for silage reserves on these heavy farms, they have already used up over a month of their winter supply before housing which would normally commence in early November. Silages reserves in the region are tight with anything left over from the previous year being fed earlier than normal. Forage budgets are being completed for these farms so that deficits can be addressed early. Those farms that were able to keep cows at grass using on – off grazing, 12 hour allocations, back fences etc. had to select paddocks on ground condition rather than grass cover. Some farms in the region have been using light stock to meet there autumn grazing targets and achieve optimum closing covers.

With 2016 being a poor milk price year, planned drainage and reseeding works in the region were postponed until 2017 in many cases. Farms that got work completed in the first half of the year such as the demo farm in Stradone have seen good results. Those that didn't complete such works in the first half of the year have had to postpone for a second consecutive year. There is a huge interest in drainage and reseeding in the region which was evident with the large turnout at the Heavy Soils open day in Stradone. Farmers in the region want to look at ways of growing and utilising more grass on heavy soils.

To conclude 2017 has been a year of two halves for the Cavan region. In the month of May it was hard to predict such a difficult period was on its way after a good spring, excellent growth rates and milk price on the rise. The second half of the year has been very difficult for farmers in the region due to prolonged poor weather from early August. It has resulted in less days at grass, greater volumes of forage being fed earlier than normal and difficulties in getting slurry spread to name but a few of the challenges.

Denis Brassil - Teagasc Advisor Castleisland

In the Castleisland area the December of 2016 and early January of 2017 were quiet mild and relatively dry leading to good overwinter growths. Many farmers took the opportunity in mid-January to spread slurry and an early application of Nitrogen from the opening of the closed season to about 24th of January. The last week of January we had a lot of rainfall and February was a reasonably wet one with not a lot of drying when it wasn't raining.

Not many farmers hit the 30% grazed by 1st of March target this varied from 0 to about 25% on the most aggressive grazing farms. The first 7-8 days of March were also quiet challenging but as March went on things improved and once cows got out they rarely had to go back in, cows in general calved in better condition this spring, possibly due to the longer dry period due to both the milk reduction scheme and poor milk price in late lactation. April was a very dry month which suits this part of the

country grass growth rates were very good, especially on the farms that got the early nitrogen. Farms that didn't start grazing until 8-10th of March ended up cutting 10-20 % of the end of the first rotation for bale silage, as growth rates were very strong.

Many farmers in the area cut first cut silage on ground that didn't get grazed in the spring between the 10-17th of May cuts were lighter but many of these have tested at plus 70DMD, normal first cuts would struggle to be 68DMD. Breeding in May appears to have gone very well with most scans reporting less than 10% empties and very Strong 6 week calving predictions for spring 2018. Another block of silage was made from 24th of May to 2nd of June. The next 10-14 days of June proved very tricky in the Castleisland area as we got a lot of heavy and persistent rain which lead in some cases to on- off grazing around the 10th of the month. Some farms looking for bulk silage crops as a result didn't get these crops until after the 20th of June. Good temperatures helped to maintain strong growth rates despite the difficult under foot conditions.

July was an overcast month in Castleisland with very few clear days which made for challenging conditions for bale making or silage cutting but with the warm temperatures we had very good growth and stock seemed have good thrive. August continued as a dull overcast month with little drying and difficult conditions to make silage or bales the warm weather lead to grass covers building very quickly across the month where these were reacted to in time and a snatch and grab policy adhered to farms hit their targets comfortably however where baling chances were missed this lead to many places that should have been cut in late August not being cut until last days of September early days of October with reduced quality and reduced after growths.

September 2017 was probably the most challenging September in years, possibly back to 2009. We had almost double the normal amount of rainfall and only 3 days when it didn't rain again it was overcast and not a lot of drying, many herds were housed by night in the middle of the month and some were housed full time as ground conditions deteriorated. Growth rate was reasonable but grazing was very difficult. October didn't bring much relief until about the 20th when we got a reasonable 10 day spell where grazing could resume with mild levels of poaching tolerated to achieve a reduction in farm cover. November has continued the difficult back end with good growth rates but difficult ground conditions leading to some degree of poaching and higher average farm covers than desired.

A good level of drainage works and reseeded was carried out in the area in April, May and June. However I am aware of several projects which were started in late July and August which have not been completed due to the adverse weather conditions hopefully we get a reasonable spring and these will be completed in April. In terms of winter fodder, it has been a great year for growing grass just very difficult to utilise it, silage has been feed on many farms since September thus reducing winter stocks. In recent evaluations 50% of farms have sufficient fodder, 40% are short less than 10% and 10% have a large deficit. Most of the deficits will be made up by feeding a few kgs of a concentrate to dry cows and some by culling culls or unproductive stock early and hoping for a good spring. Learning from the year, dry farms in this part of the country can't have enough farm roads or spur roads and access points to paddocks and heavier farms need even more. Also take opportunities when they come to make quality bales as many farms were able to maintain good yields and strong constituents in a really difficult autumn due to the bales that were made in April may, June and July.

My summary of 2017 in the Castleisland area was a game of two halves slow start great remainder of 1st half, good start to second half but we struggled to stay with it as the second half wore on overall I think with a good milk price I think we just about came out on top. Looking forward to 2018.

James O'Donoghue - Teagasc Dairy Advisor Monaghan

The grazing year started particularly well due to a reasonably good spring with less rainfall than usual. On Swanscross farm growth rates hit 40kg DM/Ha/day by late May peaked at 110kg DM/Ha/day. Although September and October were quite wet with above average rainfall, temperatures remained mild resulting in growth rates hovering just above 40kgDM/Ha/day for the last two grazing months.

In many cases and particularly Swanscross demo farm, first cut silage this year was made without any difficulty. This year first cut silage was made a week earlier on some farms due to higher growth rates earlier in the season. However any second cut silage in the region that was not harvested before the 10th August, was difficult to save due to the short time frames of suitable weather since then. In many cases silage reserves will be tight if a 20% reserve was not saved or if no surplus silage was left over from the previous year. Some heavy farms had cows housed full time since mid-September and only returned to grass on a few occasions since. This has left 4-6 weeks winter supply used up before the normal housing date of November 1st.

On a lot of Heavy Farms in the region closing covers will be higher than normal. The fact that weather remained mild through until recently meant grass growth remained strong until the end of October. Then difficult ground conditions left strong covers difficult to graze out and in some case these heavier covers were abandoned. It wasn't unusual to see average closing covers in excess of 700kg/DM/ha

The level of reseeding on heavy farms was hampered by bad weather in the second half of the season with a lot of works put off until next year. However in some cases where farmers decided to go with spring / early summer reseeding this proved to be successful and there should be valuable lessons to be learnt from this going forward.

This year has seen more emphasis on drainage works particularly on dairy farms and milk price was more than likely a huge incentive to aid this work. Similar to reseeding, farmers who had plans to complete drainage works have postponed this work until next year.

In general on most farms in Monaghan weather conditions have been quite challenging since early August, resulting in a greater volume of silage been fed in September and August, and in certain cases the closing round of grazing been severely hampered or abandoned. Many farmers had to avail of the extension to slurry spreading as ground conditions simply were that bad prior the 15th of October. Most of this extra slurry has been spread in recent weeks when rainfall levels reduce

Tom Gleeson - Teagasc Dairy Advisor West Clare

January was a stunning month. The sun shone, the grass grew over winter. Cows longed to be out, but sure, none were calved. You see, we have greater than 95% spring calving herds back here. People did use the conditions to their advantage. Plenty of slurry and urea was spread (more so than other years) at such an early stage. Spring grass covers were nicely on the rise.

Calving kicks off in early February to capitalise on grass utilisation on heavier soils. We have compact herds with mean calving dates from the 22nd of February to the 5th of March.

February got off to a good start. At a workshop here in Kilrush I was witness to an advisor trying to persuade a farmer to put out his cows in mid-February. The farmer argued that it was too early and that the weather would probably break. The advisor insisted that any day been out is more rewarding than having them in. The weather broke about 5 days later and the battle was over. Both have not changed their thinking.

The overdue rain continued until the second half of March, making the grazing conditions for the first round challenging. Plenty of meal was fed to support poor grass utilisation. Spring cow's body condition and labour saving techniques were on topic. Cows calved down in better condition this year (partly due to the long dry period). A lot more farmers practised once a day milking for the month of February as a labour saving technique. The feedback from both was good.

April was a dry month. Ground conditions were exceptional. Swards were grazed tight and any residuals from early were tidied up. Grass quality and quantity coming into May was exceptional.

May as you know brought droughts and forest fires to some parts. For here, firm conditions led to exceptional growth rate that exceeded the previous five years and continued well into July. Some mole ploughing, reseeding and reclamation work also took place during the dry spell. With growths exceeding demands for these months everybody was on top of their game for controlling grass quality. Large volumes of surplus grass was passed over and baled.

Silage quality in 2017 had a mixed response. The first two weeks in June were wet. This was welcome for growth but delayed a lot of silage harvesting. Crops that were not fit for cutting in May became too mature for mid-June. As a results a lot of lower energy silage is been fed here this year.

The weather broke in late July with 30mm in one sitting. What followed was a ritual of high volume downpours about every third day. There was never a sufficient break to plan a job. A lot of ground that was sprayed for reseeding still remains the same today. Good growth rates were maintained, however ground conditions started to deteriorate as the month of August progressed. Ambitious farmer got fertiliser and slurry spread at the narrow windows that were presented. As a result of this turn around growths slowed, surplus livestock were housed, and planned reclamation/ reseeding jobs were put on hold. The local co-ops indicate that there was a significant reduction on reclamation this autumn.

Some late second cuts and third cuts were not harvested.

On the 1st of September a high spell of sun and drying took place from that Thursday to Saturday with the weather to break again. During those days no farmer or contractor could be found as everybody was making an attempt to reseed, bale, pit, and so on. Little did we know that it was our last chance? Wetter ground was un-trafficable and therefore missed that chance. Farmers who had not pre-booked their contractors for those days also missed their opportunity. The following months

led to poor grass utilisation, low dry matter grass and diets being supported with increased meal and silage. Milk price held strong, which encouraged feeding and held body condition score on many a farm. Milk produced now should increase profit margins, but don't let it be at the cost of reduced body condition score and subsequently lower outputs in 2018.

Fertility figures in the west were good this year. There were a few cases of disappointment with non-in-calf rates greater than 10%, but on the whole people were happy. TB has been prevalent in certain areas in west Clare these last few years. Many a town land has been hit several times. Its presence in a region has greatly influenced decisions on stock going sooner than later. The improved milk price of 2017 has not put the dairy farmers ahead, but more so replenished the overdraft hanging from previous years. The wet autumn has come at a financial cost.

Due to the fact that silage pits were opened a month earlier this winter and surplus bales were used up by the end of October, the surplus silage reserves are gone before winter started. We are looking at a situation where a large number of farmers do not have enough silage for feeding until next April. The response is that there is a lot of grass on the ground. Been a coastal region, winter growths will continue. People are depending on a dry spring, however the weather conditions in spring is outside of anybody's control. We are asking farmers to do a fodder budget now and talk to ourselves or others on their options if fodder is low. There is no need to panic, but action now will save a lot of stress next spring.

Farm safety continues to be an on-going issue. There were injuries in the area in 2017. We are suggesting that farmers look at their setup this winter and reorganise, repair and install whatever is needed to make working on the farm in spring more user friendly, time efficient and less stressful. Good ideas should be written down with a plan to put them in place when practical.

Coming into December, now is a time to reflect on the year in areas of financial, physical health and mental ability. There is a long, busy and exciting road ahead for 2018. Now is the time for repairs.

Kevin Barron - Teagasc Dairy Advisor West Tipperary

On the heavy soils of west Tipperary grazing in February was challenging. There was plenty of grass but heavy rains made grazing conditions difficult. From end of March through April, May, June there were good grazing conditions with excellent grass growth and good grass utilization. First cut silage was delayed a week, because of poor weather, but reasonable yields of silage were ensiled. Second cut silage was also successfully harvested and again reasonable yields were recorded.

In late August, following on-going rains, grazing conditions became challenging, with animals having to be housed for short periods and then out grazing again when ground conditions improved. A result of this was that extra concentrate and silage were included in the cow's diet. After storm Ophelia weather conditions improved and this allowed farmers to graze out strong autumn covers. Cows were housed full time on most heavy farms in early November.

Most farmers in west Tipperary region had a reasonable grazing year and adequate silage was conserved. The wet weather in the autumn did mean that silage reserves were used to tide people over difficult grazing conditions (on average 3 weeks extra silage fed). This highlights the importance of having a decent silage reserve for heavy soils. Given a normal spring silage stocks should be

adequate but we would strongly advise farmers to calculate their silage reserves and if they feel that feed may be in short supply to take appropriate actions.

Alan Nolan – Teagasc Beef advisor Mayo

Here in Mayo it was a perfect grass year up to the end of July/early August. At that stage there was excellent grass growth, good grazing conditions and plenty of opportunities to cut quality silage and take out surplus bales where necessary. Beef farmers weighing cattle reported excellent weight gains on cattle this summer.

Unfortunately when the heavy rains started ground conditions deteriorated rapidly depending on your location. Farmers in the south of the County on drier soils were largely able to manage the wet weather. However farms on heavy soils particularly in the North of the County where the HSP monitor farm is based suffered badly.

Grazing conditions became very poor from August onwards with cattle being housed for short spells and let out again. However on some farms suckler cows were housed in early September and they are housed since. This has an obvious knock on effect on fodder supplies with a looming fodder scarcity now on many farms in the North West. To compound the problem a lot of 2nd cut silage which should have been cut in August was cut weeks later in September and October in very poor conditions. This will be very poor quality feed as well as being poorly preserved.

Due to the poor autumn not all slurry was applied. This problem varies from farm to farm but there will certainly be an issue with tanks full of slurry early next year. Many farmers will be waiting anxiously for Jan 15th the end of the closed period for slurry spreading and hoping for a dry spell.

Another downside of the poor ground conditions is that swards were poorly cleaned out this autumn with a strong butt of grass left in many fields. This is a big problem on cattle only farms with heavy soils. On mixed farms, farmers have been able to use sheep to clean out swards to a nice closing height of below 4 cm.

Teagasc is available to assist all clients and non-clients in the North-West region in particular who have concerns in relation to fodder budgeting and fodder scarcity this winter.

Stephen Connolly – Teagasc Dairy Advisor West Limerick

Grazing it was a year of two halves a good start to the year with farmers getting out early enough but from July onwards grazing was difficult and by the middle of September a lot of stock was in by night.

Silage making was tough as most farmers found it a race to get the silage cut and getting very little of a wilt. The few that got silage made early were the exception and were quite happy.

Silage Reserves will all depend on how this coming spring goes. A lot of silage was made but also a lot has been fed already since September.

Closing covers in the area are mostly high with most farmer having grass left in the fields that they would have liked to of grazed if conditions had aloud.

Level of reseeding was very minimal in the area with only a very small percentage doing some. Those who reseeded in the spring where very happy with the results. Anyone who reseeded in the autumn got it hard to spray crop and didn't get to graze the paddock before housing.

Very little drainage work carried out in this area in 2017.

How did they cope with the weather since August was really cows in by night early and practising on/off grazing.