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Teagasc Update on Forage Crisis

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Farmers in wet land areas face the real prospect of a 50% shortage in silage made for next winter, according to Teagasc advisors and this assumes normal summer weather.

Against this background Teagasc Advisors completed an assessment of the forage situation across the country on Monday, May 20th. Regional managers consulted with advisors in each of its 51 advisory offices across the country to make an assessment of the overall situation.

Overall almost 40% of all livestock farmers were severely affected by the forage crisis. This varies from 10-15% in the East to 20-25% in the South and up to 80% in the West and North West. Heavy rain over the last weekend means the situation in the North West has deteriorated significantly.

In relation to its client base of over 40,000 clients, Teagasc estimates one third have some, or all stock indoors due to poor grazing conditions/lack of grass. Almost 40% of clients have purchased fodder to deal with poor grass growth and poor grazing conditions. As we approach the time for first cut silage, one quarter of clients had no ground closed for silage.

As part of its response to the forage crisis, Teagasc set up forage exchange databases in each region for farmers very severely affected. These farmers outnumbered those supplying fodder. Farmers trying to source fodder outnumbered those supplying fodder by three to one, with approximately 500 farmers supplying significant amounts of fodder and 1,500 looking for fodder. Apart from the formal exchange Teagasc also facilitated exchange between neighbours and many hundreds benefited from this service. From mid April supplies of forage from the south and west have dried up and in recent times farmers have been getting supplies from the east of the country and from imports by co-ops etc. Teagasc identified the need for such imports at an early stage. Teagasc has also contributed silage from Moorepark and Clonakilty College to farmers in need. Teagasc has been working closely with farm organisations and with the industry and the Department of Agriculture in these efforts.

The Teagasc advisory programme devoted major resources to the fodder crisis this spring. Over 100 clinics, 35 seminars and 66 farm walks were held to help farmers evaluate their options.

In addition the issues were addressed at over 800 discussion groups involving approximately 14,000 farmers at all spring meetings of such groups.

Teagasc provided advice to clients and non-clients alike to address forage problems on farms. In the March-May period Teagasc advisors visited over 3,000 farmers, had consultations with 25,000 farmers and took over 45,000 phone calls. Over 80% of these contacts dealt with fodder related issues.

To deal with the fall out from the fodder crisis, Teagasc has set up a working group, led by Gerard Mc Mahon, Teagasc regional advisory manager in Cork East and Siobhan Kavanagh Teagasc nutritionist, to give direction to its efforts to help farmers recover. This group will focus its efforts in two areas.

Firstly the priority task facing farmers is to maximise grass growth to provide immediate feed for stock plus to build up reserves of silage for the coming winter. This involves ensuring farmers are optimising use of fertiliser and ensuring the soil lime, phosphorus and potassium levels are optimum to maximise grass growth.

Secondly advisors will have a huge task with regard to ensuring best financial management to help farmers deal with large feed bills and poor/no cash flow for the last 6 months or longer.

Teagasc is working closely with farm organisations and the industry in its efforts to help farmers get through one of the toughest years in living memory. Teagasc are running public information campaigns to encourage farmers to optimise grass growth during the peak grass growing months. Farmers are being assisted with completing fodder budgets, financial cash flow planning, and fertiliser plans.