

dairying

Early spring grass – your lifeline in 2016

John Maher

Dairy Specialist, Teagasc Animal and Grassland Research and Innovation Programme, Moorepark

There needs to be a greater focus on utilising early spring grass. Cashflow will be a challenge for all dairy farmers over the coming spring. Giving cows access to as much grazed grass from early February will:

- Lower costs of milk production.
- Increase milk price (through better milk composition.)
- Grow more grass on the farm.

Early grazing will generate an increased profitability of €2.70/cow/day for each extra day at grass through higher animal performance and lower feed costs.

There is a lot of grass on dairy farms at the moment. This means that most dairy farms will be able to turn their cows out to grass by day and by night (full-time) immediately after calving provided ground conditions are reasonable. Outlined in the rest of this article is the grazing plan for two dairy farms: Charles and Tom Crosse, from Tipperary and Mark, Liam and Billy Heffernan from Kilkenny.

Grazing plan

It is their plan to turn their cows out to grass by day and night in late January/early February. Both Mark Heffernan and Charles Crosse presented their grazing plan for 2016 at the Teagasc national conference in Kilkenny recently.

These farmers measure grass and record these measurements on the PastureBase Ireland database. The farms produced over 14 tonnes of grass DM/ha in 2015, which was higher than the average level of grass production recorded on PastureBase Ireland.

Both of these farmers are very focused on early turnout to grass in spring.

It is obvious from their spring-

grazing plans in Table 1 that they intend to graze a high proportion of the farm in February. Their reasoning behind this approach is to have a high proportion of the farm recovering in March, so they will have grass available to start the second round of grazing in early April. Charles Crosse said: "My aim is to graze 35% to 40% of the farm by 1 March – this will result in more grass grown on my farm."

Nitrogen

To encourage grass to grow well, they will have about 75 to 80 units of N applied before 1 April (Table 2). Half of this nitrogen will be applied before 1 March.

Both farmers consider this to be critical to increase grass production. Urea is the choice of nitrogen fertiliser to be applied. The Heffernan farm may consider spreading 18-6-12 (two bags/ac) in March if soil test results are a concern. This strategy of applying 18-6-12 has worked well for them in the past.

The spring meal feeding plan for both farms is outlined in Table 3. Their broad plan revolves around having cows out grazing full-time and feeding about 3kg of meal/cow/day. Both farms have a high six-week calving rate (80%).

Given reasonable weather conditions and normal levels of grass growth in February and March, their feed budgets suggest that this level of meal feeding is achievable.

Crosse said: "My plan is to feed about 200kg meal/cow by the end of April. This can only be achieved by having a very high proportion of grass in the diet of the cow."

However, both farmers are adamant that to grow more grass on their farms, they must graze a high proportion (30% to 40%) of the farm by 1 March.

Mark Heffernan said: "We would prefer to have the 30% to 40% of the farm grazed in February, than to be inside with cows in March looking out at lots of the farm to be grazed."





Table 1: Summary of the spring grazing plan for 2016

	Crosse farm	Heffernan farm
Target closing cover (kg DM/ha)	800	700
Expected growth over winter (kg DM/ha/day)	4	4.5
Expected opening cover (kg DM/ha)	1,000	1,050
Turn out cows on	1 February	End of January (if conditions allow)
Target % of farm to be grazed by 1 March	35-40%	35-40%
Target % of farm to be grazed by St Patrick's Day	70%	65-70%
Date finished first round in 2015	4 April	5 April
Target cover/cow at start of second round (kg DM/cow)	180	220

Table 2: Fertiliser/slurry application strategy

	Cross farm	Heffernan farm
Level of N fertiliser to be spread in February	23 units N/ac in late Jan 23 units N/ac in late Feb	40 units N/ac in Feb
% farm receiving slurry	20% in mid-Jan 30% farm in Feb after cows grazed	33%
Level of nitrogen applied up to 1 April	75 units N/ac	80 units N/ac

Table 3: Planned supplementation strategy for spring 2016

	Crosse farm	Heffernan farm
Level of meal to be fed/cow/day in February	3kg	3-4kg
Level of silage fed/cow in February	0	0 (when out full-time or 4-5kg if on/off grazing)
Level of meal to be fed/cow/day in March	2kg	3kg
Level of meal to be fed/cow/day in April	1.5kg	2.5kg



Giving cows access to as much grazed grass as possible from early February will lower costs of milk production

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