

Why your grazing plan

To maximise grass utilisation next year you need to be closing paddocks now

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Grass is unquestionably the cheapest feed for beef or sheep production. It is eight to 10 times more expensive to achieve a kilo of liveweight gain indoors than outdoors. Making the maximum use of grazed grass in the diet of cattle over their lifetime is key to improving margins in beef production.

Average utilisation of pasture during the grazing season on drystock farms is relatively poor at 58%. By addressing farm soil fertility, focusing on better grazing management practices and developing simple grazing infrastructures, higher grass production and utilisation is possible on any farm. Implementing a grassland plan for 2017 that will deliver a long grazing season to ensure a high level of cattle performance of 0.90kg to 1.0kg/liveweight/day should start now.



Anne and Billy Gilmore.

CASE STUDY Billy Gilmore, Cortoon, Tuam, Co Galway

Billy and his son Martin farm in partnership in Cortoon, just 10km outside Tuam in Co Galway. The 55ha farm is fragmented, totalling 11 parcels of owned and rented land. "The fields are relatively dry but 20ha could be described as heavy and liable to some flooding in winter/spring," says Billy. "In the past 18 months, the farm system has changed from a suckling to a weanling system to purchasing replacement heifers that are sold in-calf in the following September."

In 2016, 150 ewes were carried with 200 ewes planned to lamb in 2017. The stocking rate for the farm is well above the average at 1.97LU/ha. The financial performance on the farm is impressive at with a gross margin of €1,395/ha (2015 profit monitor). In 2009, the gross margin on the farm was just €539/ha.

So how was that improvement made? "We focused on a low-cost, grass-based system in order to keep variable costs low," says Billy. Maximising the length of the grazing season by improving soil fertility, introducing temporary paddocks and walking the entire farm at least once a week has increased grass utilisation to 80% at 8.6ton/DM/ha in 2015. The average of most beef farms by contrast is 4.5t/DM/ha/yr.

Looking to 2017

The primary objective now is to have adequate grass to facilitate early turnout in spring 2017. The grass that will be grazed in early spring next year has been grown in October. In relation to animal performance; one day in spring is equivalent to two days in the autumn. The key is to have a plan in place, i.e. start grazing off part of farm in early October, close this area and do not be tempted to graze this area again in November/December. "Our priority animals are the ewes and they started grazing dry, silage ground on 6 October," says Billy. "These fields had been closed since August and received one and a half bags of 10.10.20



for 2017 starts now



Billy Gilmore says grass management is crucial to high output per hectare for both sheep and cattle.

per acre in early September to help build covers and address low P and K levels.”

The sheep were grazing excellent quality grass covers of 7.5cm to 8cm in height. These fields were selected as they are dry, closest to the farmyard and will be first to be grazed by ewes and newborn lambs in late February/early March 2017.

“We divided the silage fields into four- to five-day paddocks in a fairly simple way with three strands of temporary electric fencing and mobile water trough,” says Billy. This allowed the paddocks to be grazed out to an ideal 4cm, which will allow light into the base of the sward to encourage autumn/winter tillering (thickening) and ensure good quality dense swards for following year.

“An advantage of the extra divisions is that the ewe flock were only ‘forced’ to graze hard for one day and then move out to the next paddock,” says Billy. This ensured that animal performance was maintained.

Luckily, the weather since the beginning of October has been dry allowing paddocks to be grazed out easily and these paddocks are now closed and will not be grazed again in November/December.

“We’ll put slurry on this area in late January and it will also receive a half bag of urea in early February. The silage ground will then be grazed in

Key messages

- Don't be tempted to regraze fields that you have closed (this grass is twice as valuable in spring).
- On “cattle only” farms, you should have had 60% of your farm closed by the first week of November.
- Aim to have the remaining 40% grazed and closed by the first week in December.
- Don't let stock “roam” around fields during the winter.

March/April before closing up for silage,” says Billy. “Grazing tightly and removing residual grass before closing has consistently helped deliver high-quality silage of 70% DMD+.”

FARM FACTS

- Gilmore farm size: 55ha.
- Stocking rate: 1.97LU/ha.
- Closing date: 6 October.
- Late October: 20% (grazed in early March) – 40% closed by mid-November (grazed in mid-March).
- 60% closed late November (grazed in late March).
- 80% in mid-December (grazed early April).

Simple plan for closing up the farm

To ensure that grass remains in the diet for priority stock for as long as possible this year and to set paddocks are set up for spring, the simple rule is to start closing paddocks in rotation from 6 October,

so that 60% is grazed and closed by late November and 80% by mid-December. On heavier farms, you should start closing at least a week earlier.

MANAGEMENT

Billy Gilmore believes that farm management is not just about technical issues such as grass management. He has also managed his farm succession very skilfully. Having offered all of his five children the possibility of taking over the farm Martin emerged as the one who was interested.

Over the next five years or so, Billy aims to steadily increase Martin's

input into the farm (though Martin also runs a substantial tiling business) with the objective of retiring. “I'd like to continue working on the farm and help Martin but he will be the farmer,” says Billy.

Martin currently lives on the outskirts of Tuam. Martin and Billy are considering doing a house swap whereby Billy and his wife will eventually move into Martin's house and he will move to the farmhouse.