

Living on the edge

This Kerry farmer overcomes serious challenges to achieve top grass yields

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Sean and Gabrielle Kennedy farm on the edge of Kerry's scenic Dingle Peninsula directly facing the Atlantic Ocean. More importantly, Sean manages his grass "on the edge" of what's possible. Tight, you might say. Brave. Management has enabled his dairy farm to produce 14t of grass DM/ha on average over the last two years. The Kennedys will milk 65 cows this year. In 2016, they produced 1,150kg MS/ha.

The secret to grass production is achieving 10 grazings/paddock during the season but it's not easily done in this part of the world. "We're in a favourable part of the country for grass production but we have a few challenges," says Sean. "Rainfall reaches 1,400mm (55 inches) annually. But our greatest challenge is the degree of fragmentation. Our access to grazing paddocks is restricted by this and of our 20 paddocks – only two or three (15%) can be cut."

Sean operates a regime, which ensures grass never gets ahead of the cows. This involves a 17- to 18-day rotation and grazing covers of around 1,200kg to 1,400kg DM/ha. He achieves 10 grazings/paddock and his swards average 14t DM/ha/year. "If we have a grass surplus it has to be on the cuttable part of the farm," says Sean.

Grass growth everywhere varies from season to season, month to month and week to week. Sean's farm is not any different, so he walks every paddock on the farm each Tuesday to establish the grass supply. Sean uses PastureBase Ireland to calculate the average farm cover (AFC).

"The thing is to get a picture of grass growth versus herd demand," says Sean. "The key figure is the cover/cow, which must be 130kg to 150kg DM/cow." This is certainly lower than the usual target of 160kg to 180kg DM/cow and for many dairy farmers this is truly "living on the edge".

However, as Sean says: "It allows me to have nicer grass in front of the cows." It also ensures that grass covers don't get too high and it avoids paddocks having to be cut for bales or topped. In fact, Sean says he wants to avoid grass being wasted and he has only topped three paddocks in the last two years. It is essential, he says, to avoid topping or cutting given the level of fragmentation that causes restricted access for machinery.

In 2015, Sean's farm grew over 14t of grass DM/ha with 11 grazings/paddock. In 2016, the farm grew over 13t DM/ha with nine grazings/paddock. Last August and September were very wet in Dingle and didn't allow Sean to build up as much grass as he would have liked for autumn. As a result, the grazing season was short and less grass was grown.

"We got off to a good start this year," says Sean. "Over 1.5t DM/ha has been grown in the first round of grazing. The second round of grazing started in early April. The fertiliser plan over the coming months will be two bags of 18:6:12 applied per acre in April, 1.5 bags of ASN applied/acre in May and pasture sward (27:2.5:5) applied after that."

Where next?

Visiting other farms in the Kerry area is very important for Sean. He says this allows him to compare his business to others and to see where he can improve his level of grass production and utilisation. The Teagasc/Kerry AgriBusiness Joint Programme runs regular events in the area and this programme focuses strongly on grass production and utilisation.

Sean is also a keen member of his local discussion group. "Nora always brings a grass clippers with her to the monthly meetings," says Sean. "The estimates we make at the meetings



Soil fertility, like on many other farms, is also a challenge. Sean applies lime on a regular basis and the lime status of the soils has improved a lot



Sean Kennedy and Nora O'Donovan discuss grass covers on his farm near Dingle.



help me to keep my eye in and make accurate estimates back home.”

While Sean says he learns “new tricks” from visiting other farms with high levels of grass production, he also plans to increase the level of grass production by basics such as reseeding and improving soil fertility.

As Sean walks the farm weekly and estimates the level of grass production on each paddock, he can assess each paddock for its level of pasture production for that year and also each season from PastureBase Ireland. The paddocks with the lowest levels of production are easily identified and targeted for reseeding.

Over the last 10 years, Sean has

reseeded over 50% of the farm. More reseeding is planned this May (when grass growth is at its highest). Sean is a member of the cultivar evaluation study in Teagasc Moorepark. He will be sowing a single variety called Aber Plentiful later this year.

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“Our P and K index is mostly around index 2, so there’s still room for improvement there,” says Sean. By improving soil fertility and reseeding, Sean expects to increase grass production on the farm, particularly at the “shoulders” of the grass pro-

duction season.

“I began measuring grass about 10 years ago with Sean McCarthy who was my Teagasc advisor at the time,” says Sean. “Later, I joined a grass measuring group set up by Grainne Hurley.” Today, Nora O’Donovan keeps Sean up to speed on any grazing developments. However, it is Sean’s enthusiasm for grass that keeps him competitive on growing and having his cows eating lots of grass.

“You need to remain determined to stay measuring grass regularly,” says Sean. “It’s vital if you want to make a good profit to support the family. It’s as simple as that.”