

# Getting the most from your grazing block

– utilising grass in Co Louth

Frank Campion and Ciaran Lynch  
Teagasc Animal & Grassland Research  
& Innovation Programme, Hugh  
Rooney, Teagasc, Louth.

**P**eadar Kearney farms 27ha near Ardee, Co Louth, where he runs a mid-season lambing flock. The farm itself is split into two blocks, with each managed as a separate grazing unit. It's a high-output system. Last year, Peadar lambed just over 300 ewes, and when the 80 replacements that were retained are also accounted for, the farm is stocked at just over 12.5 ewes /ha.

In 2014, after joining the BETTER farm programme, Peadar began to streamline his sheep system.

Previously, he had operated a split flock, with both early and mid-season lambing ewes. To simplify the overall farming practice, he moved fully to a mid-season flock.

Coinciding with this, he also delayed lambing until the end of the first week of March to better suit his grass supply. This has allowed Peadar to transform his flock from an early-lambing high-input system into a mid-season flock maximising the use of grazed grass and reducing input costs.

## Getting the basics right

With nearly 900 sheep (300 ewes, 80 replacements and over 500 lambs) all consuming grass each spring, good grazing infrastructure and grassland management are vital.

The first element of any grazing system is to ensure soil fertility is monitored and any issues addressed.

To do this, Peadar soil-samples the farm every two to three years and uses the results to inform decisions on fertiliser and lime applications for the subsequent years.

As shown in Figure 1, 47% of the farm has a pH > 6.2, which is considered ideal for grassland. Of the remaining land, 39% is just below this target with a pH ranging from pH 5.9 to 6.2.

## Infrastructure

Peadar has also put a major effort into increasing the number of pad-

Figure 2

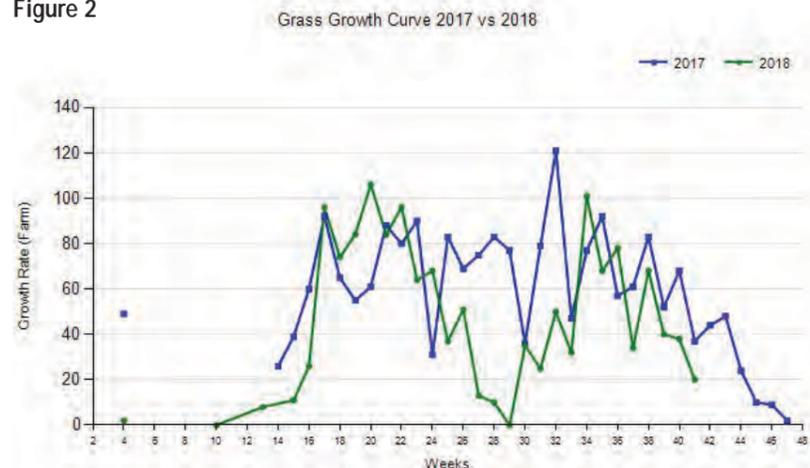
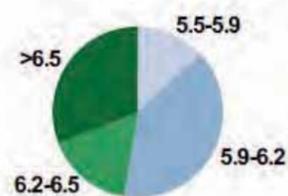


Figure 1

## Lime

Soil pH > 6.2



docks on the farm to increase grass utilisation and grass production.

For the grazing block shown in Picture 1 (p15), this area was originally divided into seven paddocks, but is now divided into 24 permanent divisions, with TAMS grants used where possible for permanent fencing and other areas divided by electric fencing.

## Temporary divisions

Temporary divisions also play a pivotal role in how Peadar manages his grass.

"They give me better control over grass and help improve grass utilisation," he says. "They also facilitate dropping out areas for silage as required when there's excess grass."

This system now forms the basis for his winter feed. While he has tried several different options for

temporary fencing, his preferred option is the three strands of poly wire and plastic stakes, seen in Picture 2. These temporary divisions are powered by battery-operated fences.

Additionally, he has adopted a 1,000-litre IBC tank to provide a portable drinker, which improves flexibility to divide.

## Grass measuring

Grass measuring is how Peadar controls and manages his grass and it allows him to make grazing decisions based on facts every week.

"I measure the grass covers every weekend and input the data into PastureBase Ireland," he says. "This allows me to calculate growth rates on the farm and how much grass I have in front of me."

From this data, Peadar is also able to make decisions on when to drop out surplus paddocks for silage or introduce feeding to meet deficits.

## Reseeding

Most of the strides Peadar has made have been on permanent pasture. However, he has begun a reseeding programme. Over the past two years, Peadar has begun reseeding a proportion of the home grazing block with monocultures as part of a monoculture evaluation trial.

The measurements Peadar collects from these monocultures provides



Hugh Rooney and Peadar Kearney.



Picture 1.



Picture 2.

data for the Teagasc Pasture Profit Index.

While no reseeding has been done this year as a result of the difficult spring and summer, it will form an important part of Peadar's grassland management for the future.

The changes and strides made by Peadar in how he manages and utilises grass on his farm were evident when he was awarded the Grass10 Sheep farmer of the year for 2017.

## Managing the drought in 2018

Over the past couple of years Peadar's strides in grassland management have allowed him to go from a

position where he was buying all his silage to making all his own silage.

However, this year it was a different story. As presented in Figure 2 (p14), growth rates for this year have been well below 2017 figures for long periods in the summer.

In order to manage the 900 sheep on the farm during this time, Peadar began supplementing lambs with concentrates from early July.

The ewes were kept in two batches to spread the pressure across the two grazing blocks, with concentrate supplementation offered to some of the ewes and others supplemented with some of the 2018 silage.

## Winter ready?

Peadar has completed his fodder budget for the coming winter and, in addition to silage he made prior to the drought and in September, he has purchased an additional 50 bales of silage locally which will give him 100% of his fodder requirements.

In addition, Peadar and Joanne Martin, who works with him at the busier times of the year, also went through his breeding flock and culled a further 20 underperforming ewes within the flock, which will also ease pressure on fodder supplies.