

Grass driving profits for this Kerry farmer

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Tomás O'Leary, Grass 10 Sheep Farmer of the Year for 2018, runs a mid-season lambing enterprise and a new contract rearing venture near Killarney.

"Our land is in two blocks on either side of Killarney, with the majority of the grazing taking place on the block near Rosnacarton, Beaufort," says Tomás. This spring he lambed approximately 300 ewes, including 75 yearlings at a stocking rate of 12 ewes per/ha.

Tomás O'Leary

The high output flock is made up of Belclare and Suffolk cross ewes and is consistently achieving litter sizes between 2.0-2.2 lambs per ewe for the mature stock and more than 1.5 for the yearlings. The mature ewes lamb from the start of March, to Belclare and Suffolk rams.

"We manage these ewes and their lambs in two groups without supplementation during the main part of grazing season," says Tomás. "The yearling ewes lamb from 17 March to Charollais rams. They are managed as a separate group up to weaning and the lambs get concentrates."

From September/October onwards, light lambs are supplemented with concentrates, with some lambs stored over winter and sold from February to April. Tomás is actively involved in the Ring of Kerry quality lamb group, through which approximately half of his lambs are sold.

Changing beef enterprise

"In recent years we have moved from a suckler cow beef enterprise into trading beef systems, including fattening beef heifers and a dairy yearling to beef system," says Tomás. "However, while both systems worked quite well in the beginning, beef price potential and issues with replacing stock showed the return from either system will be below our grass

margin target for the farm."

In autumn 2018, Tomás began contract rearing dairy heifers, with the cattle arriving at six months old and leaving the farm again at housing time. The target stocking rate for the beef enterprise on the farm is 2.5LU/ha.

Grassland management

The key to profitability on Tomás' farm is achieving high levels of grass growth and utilisation to facilitate his high stocking rates. Sheep graze up to nine months of the year, which demands good grassland management all year round.

"Since joining the BETTER farm sheep programme in 2014, we have made a number of changes to the sheep enterprise," says Tomás. "A key point is that lambing date has been pushed back to the start of March to match grass growth. As a result we've been able to reduce the amount of concentrates fed to ewes, while also improving soil fertility and grazing infrastructure."



Tomás O'Leary, Grass 10 Sheep Farmer of the Year for 2018



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Farm map of Tomás's main grazing block (above).



An example of some the fencing done by Tomás to improve his grazing infrastructure (below).

Grazing Infrastructure

"We now have three-times as many field divisions as we had just a few years ago," says Tomás. "We have permanent and temporary fencing which allows for shorter grazing periods. This protects re-growths and helps us to achieve better grazing management and animal performance."

"We have approximately 18 paddocks on the farm, with an average

size of 1.7 ha. Within these paddocks, temporary divisions are used as required particularly during the spring/summer period with the water system on the farm laid out to suit this. Both cattle and sheep graze together, with the target stocking ratio of 60:40 of sheep-to-cattle on the farm.

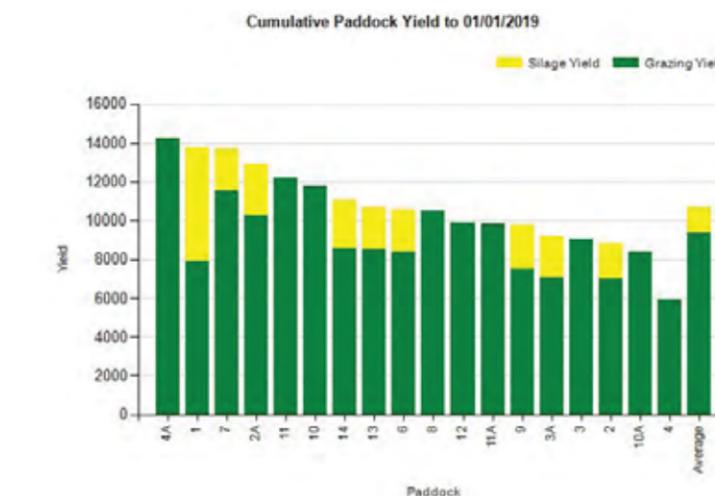
Soil fertility

The entire farm was soil sampled in 2014 and lime was spread in response to low pH readings. A nutrient management plan was put in place on the back of the soil test results and it is adjusted when new soil samples are taken, typically every two to three years. The nutrient management plan aims to maintain soil pH and to bring soil P & K levels to target Index 3.

Fertilizer is applied regularly during the year in order to maintain grass growth and quality. Information generated as a result of weekly grass measurements is used to help inform decisions around spreading fertilizer.

Managing grass supplies

"We measure grass throughout the year with the grass heights entered into PastureBase Ireland," says Tomás. "The information generated by the programme allows me to make informed grazing decisions, such as when to drop out paddocks for silage,



when to apply fertilizer or if supplementation is needed to deal with a grass deficit."

As can be seen in Figure 1, Tomás grew over 10t of dry matter/ha on average last year, despite the difficult season. However, it was down from the 14t he grew in 2017.

"The data collected on PBI also allows me to identify paddocks which are performing poorly and need reseeding. Grass seed mixes are based on the Pasture Profit Index and

include diploid and tetraploid varieties."

Grass 10 Sheep Farm Walks

As part of the summer Grass 10 sheep farm walks Tomás will host a walk on his farm near Rosnacarton, Beaufort, Co Kerry on 19 June at 7pm. The event will focus on Tomás's grassland management and what he has done to get where he is today. This is sure to be an excellent event and all are welcome to attend.