Grass driving profits for this Kerry farmer

Frank Campion, Michael Gottstein, Kevin O’Sullivan, Teagasc

T omas 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 Belted and Suffolk cross ewes and is consistently achieving litter sizes between 2.0-2.2 lambs per ewe.

Grassland management

The key to profitability on Tomás’ farm is achieving high levels of grass growth and utilising it to facilitate his high stocking rates. Sheep graze up to nine months of the year, which demands good grassland and 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 reduce the amount of concentrates fed to ewes, while also improving soil fertility and grazing infrastructure.”

Grazing Infrastructure

“We now have three-times as many 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 maintain grass growth and quality. Information on 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 allowed 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.