March Grass Management

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March has started as a difficult month to manage ground conditions. Most areas have experienced heavy rainfall and varying temperatures. It is important to have a grazing plan to make best use of March grass and set up the farm to close for silage.

Silage Ground:
The target date for closing is between the 1st and 10th April. It is important to get silage ground grazed so give preference to grazing these fields to meet the closing date for silage. Some farmers have been tempted to close up without grazing which leaves a butt of older grass. This can reduce silage quality if older leaves begin to die off. Grazing well to 3.5-4 cm ensures vigorous regrowth and will set the foundation of a high quality cut. The main questions to ask yourself; what stock will I have next winter? And what are their requirements for silage? A dry suckler cow in good body condition requires 66% DMD silage. This is typically achieved by cutting after the 9th of June and before the 15th of June. It will be a heavier cut of silage than that required for your growing/milking stock. A 70% DMD+ silage achieves higher performance as cattle will eat more of it and it has a higher energy value in particular. This higher quality silage is typically achieved by targeting a cutting date between 20th May and 2nd June. It is for this reason some farmers will take an earlier cut for their performing stock and a later cut for maintaining their suckler cows.

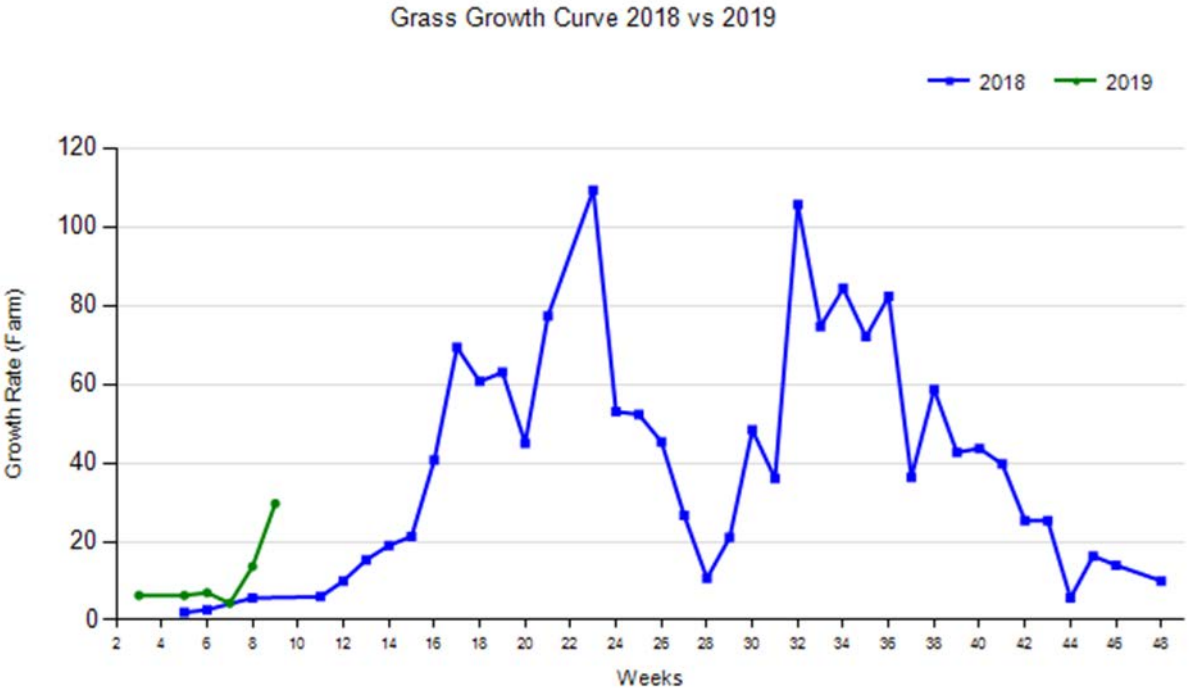
Grazing:
Key targets set out for high grass utilisation in the Grass 10 initiative is to have 60% or almost 2/3rds of the farm grazed by March 17th. This is a hard target to meet unless you have had cattle out grazing since late February.

For those who may be behind this target you can still make progress by targeting lighter covers for grazing first. This will speed up the percentage land grazed. These fields/paddocks will then be ready with a good cover of grass when you have finished grazing your heavier covers at the end of the 1st rotation. At this time of year pigtails and a geared reel with good quality polywire will be a big addition to manage stock. The main benefits of strip grazing are avoiding poaching by allowing for back fencing. Target having stock grazing an area no more than 3 days as this will not hamper the regrowth. Each extra day at grass has been shown to be worth €2/livestock unit in saved costs. It is one of the few areas where reducing costs will also lead to increased performance. These savings justify a grazing plan with rehousing always a safety option. The grass growth graph shows there are considerable differences throughout the year and between years. Making best use of this grass requires us to change our methods to match conditions.

Fertiliser on Grazing Ground:
For those with no soil test or those with a soil test result that is index 1,2 or 3 for Phosphorus (P), slurry or compounds are a good option provided no slurry has been applied to date. Applying an N-P-K compound in mid-March would be ideal to match the lift in temperatures and grass growth that the longer daylight brings. A compound containing Sulphur should also be considered from late March onwards. Phosphorus is important for root development so spring is the ideal time to supply this important nutrient. Some would say that P is like the starter in the tractor, Nitrogen (N) is the diesel and Potash (K) is the oil. A weanling producer stocked at an average stocking rate of 1.5-1.75 lu/ha would target 16-18 units N/acre which could be met by 1 bag 18-6-12 or 2500 gals of slurry/acre. A spring calving suckler to beef

operation at an average stocking rate 1.75 lu/ha will be targeting 27 units of N/acre. Higher stocking rates will require higher N. Monitor the forecast for opportunities to apply fertiliser avoiding in particular heavy rain or when water is likely to sit on the land. Don't forget to supplement lactating stock with Magnesium to prevent Grass Tetany.

- Graze silage ground tight by early April
- Adapt to conditions to get grass in diet
- Plan fertiliser on grazing land
- Grass Tetany risk



'Grass growth curve from the Newford Demonstration herd Athenry showing annual variation in growth rates'