

Coping with the weather - what to do at this stage?

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From October the rain really has been incessant and at this stage it's having huge implications in managing fodder and grass in what is now late spring.

Grazing management: Normally many farmers would have a lot of their cattle at grass by now and some farmers in drier years would have cattle grazing for a month to 6 weeks at this stage. But, because of the poor weather, all plans have been thrown off track. The surprising aspect is that many farmers still have fodder and while some farmers are now out of fodder, extra fodder can be sourced locally. All this could change if the weather doesn't improve soon.

At this time of year with a few dry days, ground condition can improve quickly particularly on the drier fields on the farm. Grass growth could triple very quickly and normally in May we have 1 or 2 weeks of very high growth rates.

In relation to grazing the advice now is to let cattle to grass in smaller groups. Graze the lighter covers of grass and leave the heavier covers to last in the rotation. This will give you more options when hopefully the weather does pick up. Maybe you will have sufficient grass by then to have all your cattle at grass and you could opt to cut those heavy covers for silage. Some farmers will decide to spread a reduced amount of fertiliser on those heavy covers at this stage and cut in 4 to 5 weeks from now.

So effectively where you can afford to, the farmer can gain somewhat from the bad weather. Fields that were closed early last October and haven't been grazed since will have heavy covers now, especially as grass growth has picked up in the last 2-3 weeks, whereas ground conditions haven't. Unless the farm is very short of grass do not graze these heavy covers. Utilisation will be poor and much grass will be wasted. If you need to graze these heavy covers, use strip wires and also back fence(s) to prevent cattle grazing and then damaging the regrowth's.

Slurry and fertiliser for silage: Obviously slurry applications have been delayed this spring on many farms. On silage fields do not spread slurry onto heavy covers of grass. Where tanks are full some slurry will have to be spread. Try to spread on fields where grass covers are low, where some level of recent grazing has taken place.

On those silage fields with heavy covers of grass the advice is to reduce the chemical nitrogen application rate. Fodder supply on many farms will be low and farmers may feel they need to increase the nitrogen application. These fields with heavy covers will have a butt of old grass. There's no point driving this type of crop on with a high nitrogen application. The response to the nitrogen will be reduced and you end up growing a heavy crop of poorer quality silage. Those very heavy crops of grass with a very white butt when cut take much longer to recover and start growing again. In situations where you take a second cut the overall yield of 1st and 2nd cut can be reduced in this case.

So possibly reduce the nitrogen application from the traditional 80 units N/acre (3 bags CAN 27%N / acre) to 50 or 60 units N/acre (2 bags CAN or 1 bag of protected Urea (46%N)/acre).

Where silage fields have been grazed and slurry has been applied to lower covers apply nitrogen as normal. Adhere to fertiliser advice where soil samples are available and with the Fertilizer Database now in place don't forget your chemical N & P limits.

The target should be to have the 1st cut silage, cutting date as close to normal as possible cutting from the 20th of May onwards. Most farms will have to make a second cut to have adequate supplies for next winter. Do a fodder budget and remember always budget to make a minimum of 20% more than is required. Unpredictable weather is very likely the norm from now on. So build fodder reserves. Remember if you don't use it in one year it can be used the following winter. So you may not need to make this extra 20% every year.

Teagasc have a National Grassland Helpline 059 9183155. Phone this number for advice or contact your local Teagasc adviser. They will provide advice in the short term and your advisor is available to provide long term advice on improving grass and fodder management on your farm.

All the best and lets pray for the fine days.