

Fragmented farm?

That shouldn't prevent you managing grass for sheep

It boils down to providing a constant supply of high quality grass to ewes and lambs throughout the grazing season

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A good rule of thumb for a lowland sheep enterprise is that each tonne of grass dry matter (DM) produced per hectare will feed a ewe and her progeny and replenish winter feed stocks. Eight tonnes of grass DM/ha will sustain eight ewes/ha.

Correcting soil fertility, implementing rotational grazing, and grass measuring will boost production. Reseeding also helps, but is costly, and should only be considered after taking the other three steps.

Where a farm has a number of separate grazing blocks, taking soil samples, applying lime as required and correcting P and K deficiencies is no different than on a farm 'in a ring fence'. The same is true of grass measuring but fragmentation is sometimes seen as a stumbling block to adopting a rotational grazing system. This is not the case for a father and son running a sheep and beef farm in Co Galway.

Outline of farming system

Michael Forde and his father Bernie run a mixed farm with a lowland sheep flock and a small beef enterprise in Corrandulla on the east side of Lough Corrib. Since joining the Teagasc Sheep BETTER farm programme last year, the flock has grown slightly with 180 ewes to be lambed down this March.

The beef enterprise involves finish-

ing 18 beef animals annually. The 27ha farm largely comprises dry free draining land, but is divided into four blocks with two blocks 6km away from the home block in different directions.

The Fordes are working closely with local Teagasc advisor Keith Fahy to complete a detailed Nutrient Management Plan based on a recent set of soil samples taken across the entire farm.

Michael acknowledges the importance of understanding and following the plan particularly in relation to applying lime, if necessary, to correct soil pH as well as ensuring soil P and K levels are where they should be.

"Soil P levels were previously high on the farm but regular soil sampling ensures they are not allowed to drop," adds Michael.

Grassland management at turnout

The strategic closing up of paddocks in autumn largely determines the grass supply available to ewes and lambs at turnout. The ultimate goal is to turn out ewes and lambs to grass covers that will meet their feed requirements with little or no concen-

trate supplementation.

On the Forde farm, unlike many other farms, the block around the farmyard is considered least suitable for turnout of ewes and young lambs mainly due to poor shelter.

"Ewes and lambs are turned out to a small paddock near the yard for a day or two before being moved to one of the more sheltered out blocks," explains Michael.

"These were closed off first last October and reasonable winter growth has built good grass covers" he continues. The aim will be to gather ewes and lambs into grazing groups appropriate to their assigned land block as quickly as is practical, usually about two weeks post turnout."

This ensures that each group gets into the rotational grazing system as soon as possible.

Field divisions/grazing groups

Despite the number of grazing blocks, the Fordes have really embraced rotational grazing. The number of grazing divisions has been increased dramatically, mainly through the use of temporary electric fencing.



Michael measuring a grass cover.



Michael Forde, Damian Costello and Bernie Forde

Summary of the plan for the coming grazing season up to weaning

- Home block (10.9ha) is divided into eight fields by well-maintained stone walls with three fields across a secondary road – the majority of winter silage requirements will be taken here and will also carry 50 to 60 ewes and their lambs.
- Corrandulla block (7ha) is one field of 1.2ha with the remaining area divided in four using temporary electric fencing – 70 ewes and lambs will be rotationally grazed and surplus covers removed as high feed value silage bales.
- Ballinduff block (4.1ha) is divided into five fields with natural boundaries – it will be grazed with sheep before the cattle are turned out for the grazing season.
- Ballynew block (5ha) has two small paddocks with the main field divided in three with temporary electric fencing – once ground conditions allow, 50 to 60 ewes and lambs will move here from the Ballinduff block.

Grass measurement

Grass measurement and budgeting can allow strategic supplementation to take place when required but will also allow you to remove supplementation with confidence once growth improves.

By identifying strong grass growth and surpluses on the farm, fertiliser applications can be adapted/reduced

to suit the current feed requirement. After the first full year recording grass cover on PastureBase, Michael says he can already see the value of doing it regularly.

“It’s a great decision-making aid in terms of when to take out surplus bales and it gives me confidence to go ahead and do it,” adds Michael. He is also looking closely at the performance of individual fields in terms of grass production and checking his soil analysis to see if soil fertility is a contributing factor for the poorer performing areas.

Lessons learned Up to last year the farm had relied heavily on concentrate supplementation to achieve good lamb performance. Lambs had access to creep feeders from a young age. “Yes the drafting pattern of lambs was impressive,” says Michael “But the economics didn’t stack up with the steep rise in concentrate prices in 2022 bringing the concentrate spend even more firmly into focus.”

On joining the sheep BETTER farm programme a key aim was optimising the lamb performance from grass with a more strategic approach of

feeding concentrates to a finishing group for a relatively short period.

One year on, Michael and Bernie are happy with the progress but admit the system still needs some tweaking.

They highlight the following as key areas to keep an eye on for 2024:

- Following the Nutrient Management Plan to achieve optimum soil pH and P & K levels.
- Adding both permanent and temporary fencing to increase the number of grazing divisions.
- Introducing concentrates earlier to lamb finishing group to avoid ewes being tight for grass at the back end of the year.
- Taking heavy covers out immediately as bales rather than letting it grow on. This will result in higher feed value silage.

Figure 1

Grass growth

Total (kg DM/ha)

