Beef
A Teagasc Advisory Newsletter
August 2014

Extend your rotation

Start targeting higher covers of grass to graze from August 10 onwards.

There is the potential on many beef farms to make better use of grass in the autumn. August is the month to start building up grass covers on fields and paddocks so that you can increase the number of days that cattle can stay at grass before being housed for the winter. Up to now an ideal rotation length has been 18 to 22 days. By the middle of September it should be extended to over 35 days. This takes planning! In August, average grass growth rates per day are usually still above the daily demand for grass and this allows you to increase your rotation length, whereas this may not be the case in September when it will be too late to have much of an impact. From August 10 onwards, start increasing the covers of grass that you are targeting to graze. Instead of aiming to be grazing 1,300 to 1600kg DM per ha (9-10cm), gradually move towards pre-grazing covers of 2,000 to 2,300 (12-13cm). Covers above 2,500kg DM per ha (14cm) should still be taken out as surplus round bales. However, avoid removing paddocks from late August onwards as they will not have enough time to grow a worthwhile amount of grass to contribute towards the last rotation. Continue to graze out swards tightly with suckler cows (avoid forcing growing weanlings/cattle to stay too long in a paddock).

Autumn fertiliser

The amount of nitrogen spread in August/early September will determine how much grass you have for the last three rotations. How much grass you need to grow to extend the rotation length will depend on your farms stocking rate.
Farms with a low stocking rate may need to spread very little nitrogen at this time of the year. Remember from late August soils naturally release their own organic nitrogen and this may be enough. On heavier stocked farms consider applying a blanket application of nitrogen. The amount to apply will depend how much of your full years allowance you have left and the overall grass supply on the farm. Swards with more perennial ryegrass will respond better to nitrogen and these should be targeted for building autumn grass.
Slurry spread in the autumn in warmer and drier weather can deliver very little nitrogen that the sward will use but it is still very valuable when it comes to its phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) content (about five units of P and 38 units of K per 1,000 gallons cattle slurry). The key issue with slurry at any time of the year is to spread it on fields that need P and K. Ask yourself: "If I were not in the field today spreading slurry, would I have been here with a compound fertiliser?" If the answer is no, should you not be spreading that slurry somewhere else?

Breeding management

Two breeding management questions for the month of August: (1) Have you stopped breeding your spring calving cows and heifers? (2) Are you going to scan your herd to identify empty cows? If your answer to either of these questions is no, you need to seriously ask yourself why? These are simple, basic management practices that every spring calving suckler farmer that wants to be profitable should be following. Eliminating very late-born calves in 2015 and having empty suckler cows fattened off grass before the winter increases output and reduces costs – something every farmer wants to do.

Selecting profitable suckler cows

At the recent Irish Grassland Association Beef Summer Tour, held in Co. Waterford, Pat Donnellan from ICBF presented some very convincing results on why suckler farmers need to use the Replacement Index to choose their replacements, rather than base their decision on the mix of breeds in the heifer. When the calvings from nearly 2,000 suckler cows on Teagasc/*Irish Farmers Journal* BETTER beef farms were analysed over a five-year period, there were very little differences found in milk or fertility when they were grouped and compared by their breed makeup. However, when the national herd of suckler

A Five Star cow with her calf

cows were grouped by their star rating for the Replacement Index, there were obvious and real differences between the groups.

The group of Five Star cows had the highest survival rates on farms and also produced the highest number of calves over the last five years. Progeny of Five Star cows had the highest average carcass weights at the youngest ages.

The performance of progeny from Five Star cows was 16% ahead of those from average cows. Every year, thousands of Four and Five Star heifers are sold off suckler farms without the seller knowing the value of them. These could either be kept for breeding on the farm or sold as high genetic merit breeding heifers. If you are signed up to HerdPlus, you can go online and identify the Replacement Index value of every heifer and cow on your farm that there is a sire recorded for.

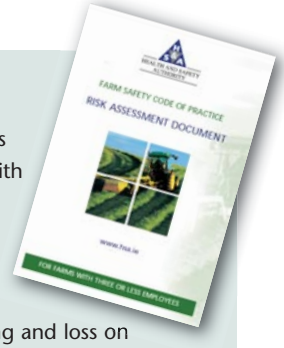
High-value heifers should be kept for breeding and high-value cows should be targeted for breeding to high Replacement Index bulls to produce Five Star replacement heifers.

There are also an increasing number of special replacement heifer mart sales where the Replacement Index values are on display. Compared to buying heifers for breeding with no figures, these types of sales give suckler farmers the opportunity to buy high-genetic merit breeding stock.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Reduce the toll on farms

National Farm Safety Awareness Day took place on Monday, July 21. The aim of the day was to focus attention on farm safety. This followed the high level of deaths in the first half of 2014, where 50% of all workplace deaths occurred on farms. Farms nationally were asked to review their farm risk assessment document and more importantly, to take safety action. As accident occurrence is strongly associated with work planning and behaviour, keep awareness levels high to reduce the toll of tragedy, pain, suffering and loss on farms.



Review your farm risk assessment regularly.

Upcoming events

An Organic Beef Farm Walk will take place on the farm of Kay O'Sullivan in Mallow, Co. Cork, on Tuesday, August 26, starting at 2.00pm. This is a BTAP-approved event and will cover the principles of organic cattle farming, grassland management, winter fodder production and animal health. Four regional open days will take place on Teagasc/*Irish Farmers Journal* BETTER beef farms this autumn. The first of these will be on James Madigan's farm in south Kilkenny on Thursday, September 4. This will be a BTAP-approved event and will be open to discussion groups to attend. The Teagasc National Beef Conference will be in the Hudson Bay Hotel this year on Thursday, October 9. More details will be given closer to the date.

RESEARCH UPDATE

Suckler cow costs – comparisons on a split calving herd

Paul Crosson, Teagasc Grange

A recent Teagasc/*Irish Farmers Journal* BETTER farm beef programme open day was held on the farm of Tom Halpin, Co. Meath. This farm operates a split calving herd with 60% calving in spring (February/March) and the remainder calving in summer (June/July). The spring calving cows are housed following weaning in November and are fed moderate quality (65-67% DMD) grass silage with a small allocation of concentrate ration for thin cows. Early calvers are also supplemented with 1kg of concentrate ration prior to turnout. Following housing in November, the summer calvers are fed higher-quality grass silage (70-73% DMD) and are supplemented with 1kg ration until the calves are weaned in February. Cows are normally turned out shortly after weaning depending on grazing conditions and receive a restricted allocation of grass until calving. The estimated cost of carrying the summer calving suckler cow is higher than the spring calving cow due to greater winter feed costs. Stock bull and replacement heifer costs are allocated equally across both herds.The farm has minimal fixed costs and a short winter feeding period (approximately 120 days), which reduces costs significantly compared to most suckler beef farms.

Table 1. Cost of spring and summer calving cows on Tom Halpin's farm.

	Spring calvers	Summer calvers
Grazed grass	105	90
Grass silage	115	158
Concentrates	16	34
Veterinary	49	49
Other variable	17	18
Stock bull	44	44
Replacement heifers	141	141
Overheads	97	97
Total	**584**	**631**

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