Teagasc
Advisory
Newsletter

BEEF

March 2017

Grass10 for beef farmers

Teagasc has launched a new four-year campaign to promote sustainable grassland excellence with its overall aim being to increase grass utilisation on Irish livestock farms. Of all of the resources that are on livestock farms, it is safe to say that grass is one of the most underutilised we have and there is huge scope to improve this. So what first few simple steps should beef farmers take in 2017 to improve the amount of grass utilised on their farm?

Improve soil fertility

Knowing whether or not your soil is deficient in the essential nutrients is without doubt the first step. When was the last time you took soil samples? Did you apply the recommended amount of fertiliser/lime/slurry that these soil samples said you needed? Do you need to take soil samples in 2017? Not knowing how much nutrients you need to feed your soil is the same as not knowing whether or not your tractor needs to be topped up with engine oil.

Increase grazing divisions

Most beef farms have at least some fields that should be divided to reduce the length of time they have stock grazing them. If ever there was an investment on a beef farm that pays for itself in less than a year, it is extra fencing and water

Edited by
Pearse Kelly
Head of Drystock
Knowledge Transfer

In this issue

Agriculture and Food Development Authority

troughs. The extra control it gives not only means more grass is grown, but also leads to much leafier grass being offered to cattle. Target at least one field in 2017 for dividing up so that cattle do not spend more than three days grazing each of the new divisions.

Improve your worst field

Every farm has a field that performs poorly compared to any other field on the farm. Assess what the problem is and address it in 2017. Perhaps it has a lot of weeds in it such as docks, rushes or ragwort? Maybe it has not been reseeded in a long number of years and there is little or no perennial ryegrass in it? The poorest performing field on your farm produces only a fraction of the grass that the average of your fields produce.

Health issues for March and April

Young calves that are turned out should be checked twice a day in March and April for signs of joint ill, scour and pneumonia.

- Freshly-calved cows will need to be supplemented with magnesium after turnout to grass.
  - The biggest risks are posed when conditions are cold and wet, when grass in a paddock is getting tight.
  - Grass that is growing fast and got well fertilised with potassium (K) poses a greater risk with low magnesium.
- Young calves that are turned out should be checked at least twice a day in March and April for signs of joint ill, scour and pneumonia. Early detection and treatment of any of these conditions increase the chances of a successful outcome.
- Many stock bulls will be called into action again in April and May. Are they in good, fit condition? Do they need to get their feet pared? If so organise to get them done three to four weeks before it is needed. If you have bought a new young stock bull, has he been fertility tested?
- If you vaccinate your cows against BVD or leptospirosis, their booster shot should be given at least one month before the breeding season commences. Heifers being kept for breeding will need a two-shot programme three-to-six weeks apart. BVD and leptospirosis vaccines can be given at the same time.
- Calves should be covered with their first shot of the 10-in-1 clostridial vaccine to prevent blackleg and covered with the booster shot one month later.
- Make sure all your calves are tissue tag tested for BVD. If you happen to identify a persistently-infected calf, and it is a confirmed case after a retest, then do yourself and your neighbours a huge favour and have it put down!

Purchased calves – where not to save money

The following four areas are where you should not be trying to save money if you have bought in young calves for rearing.

Straw bedding: young calves have to be bedded in huge amounts of clean dry straw. This keeps them warm as they nest in the straw creating their own mini-microclimate while at the same time it keeps them away from any dung and urine in the shed. You should not be able to see the calf's legs when it is lying down.

Vaccines: any farm that has begun a vaccination programme with their calves will never go back to taking the risk of not having one and hoping for the best. Pneumonia is one of the biggest killers of young calves and it is hard to avoid without vaccinating. Speak to your vet about what is the most suitable programme for your calves.

Milk replacer: the less milk replacer you feed the lower the weight your calves will be next autumn when you are housing them. Most of this lost weight gain will never be recovered. Feed 650-750g of milk replacer per head per day. In other words a 20kg bag of milk replacer should feed no more than 25-30 calves per day.

One 20kg bag of milk replacer should feed no more than 25-30 calves per day.

Calf crunch: start feeding this from day one and do not restrict it. This promotes the development of the calf's rumen so that it can be weaned off milk replacer at an early age. Buy a high-quality calf crunch that is palatable. Calves can be weaned once they are eating over 1.0kg per day for three consecutive days.

Newford suckler herd update

All of the spring-2015-born suckler calves from the Newford Suckler Demonstration Farm based in Athenry have now been slaughtered. These are mostly a mixture of Charolais- and Limousin-sired stock out of the half-bred Angus cows that the herd is made up of. **Table 1** has the key figures. On average the steers graded R= 3= and the heifers graded R+ 4-. While the carcass weights are impressive for cattle that were slaughtered at a relatively young age, they are below the long term target for this herd of 320-330kg heifer carcasses (at 20 months) and 360-370kg steer carcasses (at 21 months). For these weights to be achieved (while at the same time being at acceptable fat covers), the selection of the sires for breeding to the cows will become even more important. Sires with high-carcase-weight breeding indices will be essential (over +30kg). There are weekly updates online at newfordsucklerbeef.ie detailing what is happening on the farm.

Table 1: Newford slaughter performance

Average	49 Heifers	40 Steers
Slaughter date	Nov 17, 2016	Dec 11, 2016
Age (months)	20.25	20.75
Liveweight (kg)	573	633
Kill-out	52%	52%
Carcass weight (kg)	296	332
Sale price per kg	€3.98	€3.90
Carcass value	€1,177	€1,294

RESEARCH UPDATE

Finishing suckler beef bulls

Mark McGee, Ciarán Lenehan, Aidan Moloney and Eddie O'Riordan of Teagasc, Grange Animal and Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, investigated whether finishing early-maturing bred suckler beef bulls on pasture at 15 or 19 months of age is better.

Compared to high-concentrate systems, grass-based finishing of suckler beef bulls is economically attractive. Achieving a commercially acceptable carcass fat score (> 2+) with young bulls finished at pasture is difficult. The performance of early-maturing sired suckler bulls finished at pasture, with or without concentrate supplementation, at 15 or 19 months of age was evaluated.

Sixty Aberdeen Angus-sired bulls (initial liveweight 399kg; age 389 days) were assigned to one of four treatments: (i) slaughter age 15 months (S15) offered grass only; (ii) S15 offered grass + 3.2kg dry matter (DM) barley-based concentrate daily; (iii) slaughter age 19 months (S19) offered grass only; and, (iv) S19 offered grass + 3.2kg DM concentrate daily. They were turned out to pasture on April 7 and were rotationally grazed in paddock systems. For the supplemented treatments, concentrates were introduced immediately post turnout for S15 and 104 days later for S19. Slaughter occurred 63 days (S15) and 192 days (S19) post turnout. Increasing slaughter age significantly increased carcass weight (265kg vs 355kg), kill-out percentage (54.2% vs 56.1%), carcass conformation (~O+/R- vs R=/R+) and carcass fat (~2+ vs 3-) scores. Supplementation reduced grass intake by 0.71 and 0.32 kg DM/kg DM of concentrates for S15 and S19, respectively. Supplementation significantly increased carcass weight: 79g carcass/kg DM of supplement for S15, and 92g carcass/kg DM for S19 – and tended to increase kill-out percentage (54.7% vs 55.7%) but had no significant effect on carcass fat or conformation scores. In conclusion, carcasses were adequately finished, with or without concentrates at S19, but not at S15.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Older farmers face higher risk

During 2016, 13 of the 21 farm fatal accidents happened to farmers aged 60 years or over. Age is an internationally-known risk factor for farm deaths. In northern European countries, systems are in place which allow farmers to retire by the age of 60. In contrast about 50% of Irish farmers are aged 58 or older. What can be done to minimise the fatal and serious injury rate among older farmers?

Farm work is more dangerous for those over 60.

Communication within the farm family is key to gaining a realisation of dangers to older farmers. In particular, dangers associated with tractors and machinery, livestock and assessing heights should be considered.