BEEF

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Tasks for October

With the ploughing over, it really feels like the days are getting shorter and it's time to make plans for the winter and, indeed, the spring. October is a critical month for setting up the farm to ensure maximum weight gains for both the winter and spring. As there are a lot of things to get done this month, take time to pencil tasks into your diary.

October 2 – week one

Grass: Time to draw up the autumn planner. This is a simple plan which outlines how 60% of the farm gets grazed and closed from October 10 to November 7. The idea is that grass grazed and closed in this period will provide grass to turn out to in the spring. You may need to change the dates to suit your farm by one-two weeks and heavier farms should start closing earlier. The example shown in **Table 1** is for a 100-acre farm. It is important to identify which paddocks are getting grazed and closed, as this will help focus the mind.

Lime: Can lime spreading be worked into your autumn planner by spreading where required after paddocks are closed?

Silage: Time to take silage samples so that you have the results back in time for winter housing. This will allow you to supplement silage correctly.

October 9 – week two

Grass: Graze and close 15% of your farm, or 15 acres for every 100 acres of grass farmed. Attend a Grass10 walk near

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Teagasc

AGRICULTURE AND FOOD DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

you for help and advice (farm walk details are available on https://www.teagasc.ie/news--events/). Graze paddocks to 3.5-4cm to encourage winter tillering of the grass plant and do not re-graze fields that have been closed. Skip heavier paddocks – and graze paddocks with ideal covers – to meet 60% target if necessary. Use wet weather grazing techniques if ground conditions are poor.

Slurry: This is the last week for spreading slurry, only spread where ground and weather conditions allow.

BDGP: If you are in the Beef Data and Genomics Programme (BDGP), you are required to update your carbon navigator each year. If you do not complete this before November 1, your BDGP payment will be hit by a 20% penalty. The carbon navigator can be completed either online or on paper for BDGP I applicants and online only for BDGP II applicants, in conjunction with an approved adviser. There are three main areas of information being requested, covering the period from January 1 to December 31, 2016: the length of the grazing season; nitrogen efficiency (nitrogen usage); and, slurry management.

October 16 – week three

Grass: Graze and close a further 15% of your farm, or another 15 acres for every 100 acres of grass farmed.

National Beef Conference: Attend the Teagasc National Beef Conference. This is an event not to be missed! This year's conference is taking place in the Tullamore Court Hotel on Tuesday, October 17 and will focus on planning for healthy profits and increasing productivity from your beef herd. Topics covered will include:

- improving the control of liver and rumen fluke;
- successfully using AI in a 100-cow suckler herd;
- grassland management tips from the beef finalists of the Teagasc Grass10 Farmer of the Year Competition;
- beef research updates; and,
- Brexit.

October 23 – week four

Grass: Graze and close a further 15% of your farm, or another 15 acres for every 100 acres of grass farmed.

Farmyard manure: This is the last week for spreading farmyard manure (FYM). Only spread where ground and weather conditions allow. Any remaining FYM should be removed from fields and stored in suitable storage to meet the requirements of cross compliance.

Cattle weighing: Make plans to weigh your cattle at housing time. Have the scales ready or book a weighing service.

Table 1: Example autumn planner for a farm of 100 acres.

	No. of acres to be grazed	Target paddocks	Actual area grazed (acres)
October 10-16	15	Yard field	
October 17-23	15	Top field	
October 24-30	15	Lag field	
October 31-November 6	15	Bottom field	
Target area grazed and closed by November 7	60		

BETTER FARM UPDATE

Improving grazing, streamlining calving

Michael McDonald of the BETTER Farm beef programme has been working hard to improve things on his holdings.

Michael farms part time with the help of his father John just outside Thomastown in Co. Kilkenny. The land is divided into two blocks. There is 44ha in the home block, which is heavy ground, while there is an out farm of 16ha, which is of a much drier type of soil. Grazing infrastructure on the farm has improved immensely since the start of the programme. The numbers of grazing divisions has increased from 10 to over 50, with a lot of permanent fencing erected and extra water troughs installed. Along with the extra paddocks, a lot of reseeding of older less-productive swards has taken place over the last few months. Michael moved from a spilt-calving pattern to 100% autumn calving this year. Currently there are 70 autumn-calving cows and the aim is to increase numbers to over 100. Calving takes place from July 10 to September 10 and this year over 75% of cows calved in the first five weeks. To facilitate the extra cows, a three-

Michael moved to 100% autumn calving this year.

bay slatted shed with a 25-foot lie back is in the process of been erected. Michael has a keen interest in breeding, and is very focused on breeding stock with maternal traits. The majority of cows are served using AI, with high-maternal Simmental, Charolais and Limousin bulls mainly used. An easy-calving Aubrac stock bull is let with the heifers and this year over 30 maiden heifers will be served. In the current system, bulls are sold between eight and 12 months old, with the heifers sold at a slightly-older age. The plan in years to come is to continue selling males at a similar age and to sell surplus heifers in calf at two years old.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Get ready for winter

The clocks go back on October 29 as winter sets in. Firstly, check that your electrical safety switches or 32mA residual current devices (RCD) are tripping correctly. An Irish study indicates that 15% do not trip when tested. Consult the ESB Networks booklet – 'Farm Safely with Electricity'

for further information. Check that farmyard lighting is adequate. Secondly, check that fire/smoke alarms in the home are in working order.

RESEARCH UPDATE
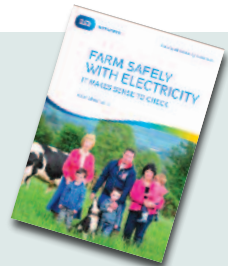
Stock bull fertility database

Kieran Meade of Teagasc Grange and Sean Fair of the University of Limerick report on the analysis of fertility in Irish stock bulls.

Currently in Ireland, it is estimated that 83% of calves born to beef cows are bred with a stock bull, while approximately 55% of dairy replacements are sired by a stock bull (source: Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (ICBF)). Even farms which use AI initially often follow up with a sweeper bull to catch cows which are repeating. The average suckler cow in Ireland is only producing a calf every 13 months, which is significantly outside the requirement for a 365-day calving interval to maintain a compact calving pattern – one of the key drivers of on-farm efficiency in grass-based production systems. A successful outcome to a given service (i.e., birth of a live calf) is a combination of both male and female fertility, yet in contrast to cow fertility records, bull fertility figures remain scant on the ground. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that a significant number of working bulls are subfertile or infertile.

This is of concern as a single bull tends to breed a large number of females, and thereby, a subfertile bull can have a significant detrimental effect on overall herd fertility. In addition, high-value pedigree stock bulls purchased at specialised breeding sales at approximately 15-18 months of age last, on average, 3.5 years before being culled (source: ICBF), demonstrating that there is a clear problem with the longevity of these bulls. With this in mind, we have developed the first large scale stock bull fertility database to collate multiple sources of information available on measures of fertility, including bull breeding soundness evaluations. A breeding soundness evaluation is an assessment, at a point in time, of a bull's semen quality and structural soundness. Preliminary findings from the analysis of this data suggests that of 627 bulls routinely assessed, 24% failed the evaluation, mainly due to poor semen quality.

These bulls ranged across all the main breeds, and while some of these bulls were young and would have passed at a subsequent evaluation, it does provide some insight into the level of subfertility in the Irish stock bull population.

Recently, we have also incorporated semen quality data generated objectively using a computer-assisted sperm analysis (CASA) system of a much larger number of stock bulls.

CASA allows the accurate, repetitive and automatic assessment of multiple sperm parameters that are indicative of sperm health and function, including sperm concentration, motility, morphology, as well as sperm swimming speed and patterns. This will facilitate a further more detailed characterisation of sperm quality in problem bulls.

This work has given us the first insight into Irish stock bull fertility and, as the number of records grow, will be a critical tool to aid the identification of factors regulating fertility in Irish stock bulls. In combination with the national beef genotyping scheme, the novel phenotypes from this database will facilitate the identification of genes contributing to subfertility in the Irish stock bull population.