

BEEF

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Out to grass this spring



Edited by
Karen Dukelow
Cattle Specialist

I asked a group in mid January, what were the possible challenges to getting cattle out to grass this spring? I was met with a humorous comment of: "It's a wee bit damp". I think I could have written "WET, WET, WET" on the flipchart that same day. So there is a lot of grass out there, how to get it grazed is the next thing! We need to start planning for turnout, so that we can make the most of dry weather when it does come.

1) Breakfast for grass

Every day needs a kick-start with a good breakfast. It's the start of a new year for grass and it needs a good breakfast of early nitrogen (N) in the shape of urea or slurry. When making out a fertiliser/slurry plan, slurry needs to be prioritised for low phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) ground with low covers. As soon as

conditions allow, spread 2,500 gallons of slurry on covers not planned for grazing until March, and spread half a bag of urea on the remaining ground. Urea is also more stable in soil than CAN in the early spring period. N applied in the form of urea has the ability to 'cling' to the soil. Applying early N fertiliser in spring (weather permitting) will not only grow more grass but help the recovery of grass after grazing, so there will be more grass available for the next round of grazing also. In March, spread 2,500 gallons of slurry/acre and spread half a bag of urea/acre on remaining ground. Spread 23-40 units of N/acre on the remainder. You can switch to compound in March where fields are low in P and K and where you have very good conditions. Across a number of trials and from

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on-farm data, the average response to N in the spring is 10kg of grass DM for every 1kg of N spread. 1kg of grass is worth 16c in the spring, and at current prices, 1kg of N is costing 80c. This is a 2:1 return on money spent. However, for fertiliser to work, it first needs to be ordered, delivered and spread on the paddocks. There is zero response to N left in the bag.

2) Grass for breakfast, dinner, tea and supper

So grass is growing, the next thing is to get the best feed available on your farm into animals' mouths. You need the first rotation to last until growth equals demand on your farm, and you need to ensure you get all the farm grazed (include silage ground if grazing it) in the first rotation. The biggest challenge is getting it all grazed as weather and ground conditions can be challenging in the spring. Make out a simple plan with turnout date and end of first rotation date. For example, a dry farm in the south with a turnout of February 12 would have 50 days grazing, with the second rotation starting on April 3. On 100 acres, this means grazing two acres a day. This plan can be tweaked as the spring progresses. A spring rotation planner can be generated by PastureBase Ireland. It is free to access on: <https://pasturebase.teagasc.ie>.

3) Benefits of a grass diet

Every blade of grass into an animal's mouth in the spring is a saving on costly indoor feed and will have liveweight benefits. So what we are aiming to do is to make the most out of challenging conditions. Every day at grass is worth €2.00/livestock unit (LU). For example, if 60 extra days at grass are captured for 50LU, then it is worth €6,000. However, to capture days at grass in wet weather you need to have the right land, the right cover, the right paddock, the right animal and the right mind! Where possible, move stock to drier parts of the farm. Lower covers are easier to graze in the wet and as they are green to the base, are faster to recover. Ideally the paddock should be squarer in shape. An irregular shaped paddock will lead to "the racecourse effect", where stock will walk up and down the perimeter fence. If you know a spell of prolonged wet weather is coming, hold off on turning out more stock until the weather settles. Cattle that are used to grazing will be more settled. If cattle are very unsettled, do not be afraid to rehouse. Trial work has shown that cattle who get turned out early and are then rehoused are still heavier than animals that are turned out late.

Upcoming events

Table 1: Teagasc/Animal Health Ireland (AHI) beef health meetings "Animal Health – A Key to Trade".

Date	Venue farm (all walks from 11.00am to 1.00pm)
February 19	Gerard Rochford, Cleariestown, Co. Wexford
February 21	Alan McDonald, Mullingar, Co. Westmeath
February 28	Tim and Judy Barry, Innishannon, Co. Cork
March 1	Frank Harrington, Knock, Co. Mayo
March 2	Alan and Richie McBride, Newtowncunningham, Co. Donegal

Grass10 early spring grass beef walks.

Wednesday, February 28 – Raymond, Dwayne and Gilbert Stanley, Brittas, Co. Tipperary – 2.00pm
Tuesday, March 6 – Tommy Holmes, Tullysleve, Ballina, Co. Mayo – 3.00pm
Thursday, March 8 – Joe Healy, Dressogue, Athboy, Co. Meath – 2.00pm
Thursday, March 8 – Paddy Gavin, Ballinadee, Co. Cork – 11.00am



BETTER FARM UPDATE

Driving output

One Meath farmer is implementing new measures to increase the output of his holding.



Joe Healy, with the help of his father John, keeps 80 suckler cows on just over 43ha of heavy clay-type land in Dressogue, Athboy, Co. Meath.

Herd composition

The herd of cows is made up of predominately continental breeds, along with a few first-cross Limousins originating from dairy cattle. Calving takes place in late spring/early summer, with the majority of cows calving in April and May, and those remaining calving in June. Joe favours calving at this time of year as ground conditions and weather are generally improved, and calves can be born outside in a healthy environment, minimising the risk of disease. AI is used for over six weeks, with a wide variety of breeds and bulls being used, before the Limousin stock bull joins the herd to clean up for four weeks.

Slaughter statistics

Male progeny are slaughtered as bulls on the grid under 16 months of age. Last year 40 home-bred bulls were slaughtered, at an average age of 15.8 months, a carcass weight of 414kg, and a grade of U=2+. Heifers were

generally sold as stores, but this year the decision was made to take them to finish. They are currently on 5kg of ration and 71% DMD silage *ad lib* and at the last weighing were gaining 1.5kg daily. To further drive output on the farm, 29 spring 2017-born weanling bulls with an average weight of 407.5kg were purchased for finishing under 16 months.

Performance

The first nine purchased are currently on 12kg of a high-cereal ration (consisting of 70% barley, 12.5% maize, 12.5% of protein balancer with yeast and acid buffer and 5% molasses), 7kg of silage and 0.5kg of straw, and are currently gaining 2.03kg daily. The remaining 20 are on 4kg of the same ration and 75% DMD silage, and they will be built up to *ad lib* over the coming weeks. They are currently gaining 1.5kg daily.

Joe has all stock housed since late October and on January 13, the farm had an average cover of 916kg DM/ha. Last year, the farm grew just shy of 10t DM and this year with improvements to soil fertility and reseeding of older less-productive swards, it is hoped that the 12t mark can be reached.



RESEARCH UPDATE

Using space wisely

Bernadette Earley, Mark McGee, Edward O'Riordan and Michael Keane of AGRIC, Teagasc, Grange, Co. Meath looked at the effect of space allowance and floor type on finishing beef heifers.

There is currently no legislation surrounding the space allowance and floor type that should be provided to beef cattle during the winter finishing period; however, concerns have been raised regarding housing systems currently in use. The objective of this study was to investigate the effect of space allowance and floor type on the performance and welfare of finishing beef heifers. Continental crossbred heifers (n=240: mean initial liveweight – 504kg (standard deviation 35.8)) were grouped by breed, weight and age and randomly assigned to one of four treatments for 105 days: i) 3.0m²; ii) 4.5m²; iii) 6.0m² space allowance per animal on a fully slatted concrete floor; or, iv) 6.0m² space allowance per animal on a straw-bedded floor. Heifers were offered a total mixed ration *ad lib*. Dry matter intake was recorded on a pen basis and refusals were weighed back twice weekly. Heifers were weighed, dirt scored and blood sampled every three weeks. Whole blood was analysed for complete cell counts and serum samples were assayed for metabolite concentrations. Behaviour was recorded

continuously using infrared cameras from day 70 to day 87. Heifers' hooves were inspected for lesions at the start of the study and again after slaughter. Post-slaughter carcass weights, conformation and fat scores, and hide weights were recorded. Heifers housed at 4.5m² had a greater liveweight average daily gain (ADG) than those on both of the other concrete slat treatments; however, space allowance had no effect on carcass weight. Heifers accommodated on straw had a greater ADG (0.15kg), hide weight, better feed conversion ratio, and had better dirt scores at slaughter than heifers accommodated on concrete slats at 6.0m². The number of heifers lying at any one time was greater on straw than on concrete slats. Space allowance and floor type had no effect on the number of hoof lesions gained or on any of the haematological or metabolic variables measured. It was concluded that increasing space allowance above 3.0m² per animal on concrete slats was of no benefit to animal performance. Housing heifers on straw instead of concrete slats had no effect on carcass weight.



HEALTH & SAFETY

Look out for blind spots

In 2017, 58% of farm workplace deaths involved farm vehicles. Our sympathy goes out to all the bereaved. Always stay in control of vehicles and watch out for bystanders. Some accident victims who were driving tractors were found close to the

tractor or were run over by a vehicle. Always operate a tractor from its seat and ensure you are able to operate the controls. Do not lean out of the driving position, as falling out can result in death due to crushing.