



BEEF

May 2018

Thinking of 2018/19 fodder

The combination of harsh east winds and persistent rain has meant poor grass growth in early April and very poor ground conditions. As a result, stock have had a longer than expected housing period and much of the fodder stocks on farms are well and truly depleted.

Although it might seem early to be thinking about next winter considering we are still in last winter's clothes, you need to act now to build fodder supplies. The earlier you react to what has happened the more likely you are to be able to replenish depleted stocks.

Teagasc has compiled a short fodder sheet that will quickly allow you to calculate your winter feed requirements and also to determine what extra fodder you

will need if, for example, you want to build up one month's reserve. So how many extra round bales or acres of first- or second-cut silage might you need to take? This should be your starting point so that you have an idea of what will be needed. Ask your adviser for more details.

From May through to late August, you will grow up to 90% of your grass for the year. This also coincides with the period that you will get the best response from chemical fertilisers, so even if you are not heavily stocked, you should be mindful of this. Get the fertiliser out early and capture as much fodder as possible early in the season.

Silage ground

Silage ground will be closed up at

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this stage. The later closing on some farms might compromise yield of first cuts. If you are worried about yield, you could let it grow out for an extra seven-10 days or into the first week of June. Don't delay cutting beyond this point, as you will drive down quality and the delay in cutting will have an effect on your second cut and the availability of after grass later in the season.

Some farms haven't got stock out to graze the silage ground and have closed up, so there is a butt of grass there from last autumn. Again if this is let grow out, the dead butt could decrease digestibility by up to seven units. Do not be tempted to delay cutting in this instance. If you are happy with the yield, consider taking it out a few days earlier if the weather is right.



Assess damage to paddocks.

Silage is about striking a balance between yield and quality. Even this year you need to aim for decent quality, i.e., more than 70% DMD if possible. Remember good quality silage gives you options, poor quality means more supplementation.

Grazing ground

The first step is to get out and walk the grazing ground to assess ground conditions, damage to paddocks and grass covers. It is important that paddocks that may have been damaged in March/April are let dry out and are not damaged again or you could get up to a 50% drop in grass yield over the course of the season.

It is not a year to be skimping on fertiliser. Most drystock farms will benefit from 40-60 units of nitrogen (N)/acre of fertiliser this month to boost grass growth and sward tillering. The extra fertiliser will allow most drystock farms to grow surplus grass that can be taken out as round bales or taken along with the first cut. One note of caution: with extra fertiliser potentially going out on grazing ground (particularly if it is a compound with phosphorus (P) and potassium (K)) cows will need to get some magnesium to combat the increased risk of tetany.

Phosphorus for grazing

It has been a very difficult spring for grazing. Grass growth was slow and grazing conditions were often poor. Phosphorus (P) is essential for early season growth. It is also important that P is available in soil to ensure the survival of the ryegrass plant. In many cases, grass plants were damaged this spring or last autumn from

grazing. Having a supply of P fertiliser in the soil will help the repair and recovery process of the sward. An application of one bag/acre of 18:6:12 or 14:7:14 will benefit the production and survival of ryegrass. Applying a small level of potassium (K) is also beneficial to ryegrass survival. This application of fertiliser will also go a long way to replacing the P being removed by liveweight leaving the farm.



Close observation of cows is critical.

Breeding issues

The earlier-calving suckler herds will have started breeding in late April/early May and the remainder will begin this month.

The obvious effect of the prolonged housing period and scarce fodder has meant that cows will probably not be in as good condition as other years. This could potentially delay cows from coming on heat or reduce conception rates. In order to give cows every chance, you need to keep plenty of good quality grass ahead of them throughout the breeding season. Any cows that have not been observed on heat in the first few weeks of the breeding season should be examined/scanned and cows that are showing

any sign of infection should be washed out. Close observation during the first month of breeding is critical, both of the cows that have been served and the ones that have not. A high number of repeats may indicate a fertility issue or a stock bull not working. You may have to show some degree of flexibility with when the breeding season will end this year or you may have a higher culling rate than normal. First calvers will be the animals that will struggle most as they try to gain condition, grow and go back in calf.

Maiden heifers that would normally have been at grass for four to six weeks pre breeding may also struggle to meet target weights at the start of breeding. With good management and compensatory growth, they will meet the targets of 80% of mature weight at calving.

Beef 2018 – enhancing knowledge

Teagasc will open the gates in Grange, Co. Meath to host Beef 2018 on Tuesday June 26. More details will follow in next month's newsletter but the day will feature segments on all the main beef enterprise systems, an infrastructure village and a farmer forum. If you are involved in suckler or dairy calf to beef systems, then the day will be well worth attending, so mark it in your diary.



BETTER FARM UPDATE

Focus turns to breeding heifers in Ballacolla

The Lalors from Co. Laois are changing their system to speed up finishing.

While it has been a long winter on all beef farms, breeding season is on the verge of kicking off in most spring-calving herds again. Harry and Joe Lalor's farm in Ballacolla, Co. Laois operates a suckler to finishing system. Up until joining the BETTER Farm challenge, the Lalors finished heifers under 24 months of age and bulls at 20 months. This year the system has been tweaked slightly, with half the bulls being finished under 16 months and the heifers to be killed off grass at 20 to 21 months.

Harry reared 40 dairy-bred heifers in 2017 and is eager to breed 20 more this year, along with 20 suckler-bred heifers, all of which will be calving down at 24 months. The bucket-fed heifers have performed extremely well since arriving on his holding at two weeks of age, achieving an average daily gain (ADG) of

0.85kg/head/day. On average, the heifers in question weigh 407kg and are consequently well fit for breeding, which kicked off on May 1. They are all five-star Hereford x Friesian heifers and will no doubt bring milk into the herd. The early maturing blood line will also suit Harry's system going forward as he hopes to get stock away at a younger age, hitting adequate fat covers to meet carcass specifications.

Table 1: Weight targets at weaning, breeding and calving depending on mature cow weight.

Mature cow weight	Weaning weight	Bulling weight	Calving weight
Target percentage of mature weight		60%	80%
600kg	260-280kg	360kg	480kg
700kg	300-320kg	420kg	560kg



HEALTH & SAFETY

Prevent slurry gassing

May is a highly active farming month, particularly machinery work, including silage harvesting and fertiliser and slurry spreading. Open slurry access points and manholes are a particular hazard at this time of the year. A total of 10% of all farm workplace deaths are

due to slurry drowning or gassing. Make sure that all slurry danger access points are well guarded when in use. Prevent slurry gassing by picking a windy day for slurry agitation and handling, and never enter a tank which is a confined space.

Close slurry openings.

