

BEEF

March 2019

Grassland targets

A lot of beef farmers are a month ahead of normal when it comes to their grassland management in 2019. The mild, dry weather has meant that both nitrogen (N) and stock have been put out earlier. The plan for March should be to put out more stock as the month progresses and to start planning the next round of fertiliser. For most beef farms, the first grazing rotation should not end until the second week in April. Only graze enough ground each week so that this end point is reached. Finishing earlier than this runs the risk of going back into regrowths that are too low and could leave you short of grass in April, especially if the weather turns unfavourable. Taking too long to finish the first rotation is also not to be recommended, as grass quality during April will be badly affected due to very heavy covers of grass building in the second rotation. For many, the second round of fertiliser should be a high phosphorous (P) and potassium (K) compound such as 18:6:12. Applying 1.5 bags per acre is recommended as it provides a worthwhile

Edited by
Pearse Kelly,
Head of Drystock Knowledge Transfer



Aim to finish your first grazing rotation by the second week in April.

amount of N, P and K at a time of the year that the grass plant can make good use of them. When enough grass covers are grazed off, use the opportunity to get most of your slurry spread during March. It is well proven that spreading slurry at this time of the year compared to spreading it during the summer allows the N in the slurry to be of better use to the grass plant.

Purchased calves

Significant numbers of calves are being bought at the moment for rearing on beef farms. Having a proper feeding programme up until weaning is essential if they are to meet their lifetime daily gain targets:

- feed calves three litres of calf milk replacer twice daily (at 12.5% solids) until they are at least three weeks of age;
- supplement with good quality starter concentrates, and roughage in the form of good quality chopped straw (not hay);
- calves should have access to clean fresh water at all times;
- calves should not be weaned until they are consuming at least 1kg of calf starter/day for three consecutive days;
- wean calves gradually off milk replacer over a seven- to ten-day period – for a concentration of 12.5% solids, use 125g of milk powder and 875ml of water to make one litre of mixed milk;



Pre-weaning nutrition is vital if calves are to meet their lifetime daily gain targets.

- protein levels in a calf milk replacer should be at least 23-26% and consist predominantly of milk proteins; and,
- ensure that the water temperature is not greater than 39°C.

One of the most common causes of ill health in calves is scour. Attention to hygiene is crucial to prevent it. Treatment consists of pain and fever treatment, combined with rehydration and proper nutrition. Isolate the calves from others to avoid cross infection. Get electrolytes into them and do not stop feeding them milk replacer. Talk to your vet about the best vaccination programme to prevent the other most common cause of ill health in young calves – pneumonia.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Maternal cows can be deadly

Cow- and heifer-related farm deaths account for 50% of all livestock fatalities and 7% of all farm deaths. An Irish medical study indicated that 65% of non-fatal livestock-related injuries were cow related, leading to an average hospital stay of 10 days. A further medical study recently described the force of being attacked by a cow as similar to being struck by a juggernaut.

Spring time, when newly born calves are being handled or treated, is a particularly high-risk period. The key safety message is to create a



sound physical barrier when treating or tagging calves. Also, maternal aggressiveness is a heritable trait, so don't breed from such cows.

BETTER FARM UPDATE

Fast to grass



Shane Gleeson expects no transition period as he moves to grass.

Farming in Cappamore, Co. Limerick, Shane Gleeson has recently finished grazing a crop of redstart with a group of 30 dairy-cross weanlings. The crop was planted in early August and received three bags of 18-6-12 per acre, along with a bag of CAN. Farmyard manure was spread at the tilling stage also. The crop yielded approximately 5t/ha DM and due to good weather over December with low rainfall, crop utilisation was better than expected.

Weanlings will be moved to grass straight from the crop of redstart now, with a view to having no indoor period. This will help reduce wintering costs and will also hopefully improve thrive as the weanlings will not have to readjust to grazing outdoors after a typical four- to five-month indoor period on silage and meal. Stock will be weighed in the next week or two to assess their performance on redstart.

Calving is progressing well, with 30% of the herd calved. The farm experienced an outbreak



of cryptosporidium last spring, which resulted in high levels of calf mortality in the suckler herd. This year, with ground being dry and weather mild, all cows and calves are turned out to grass within a couple of days of birth. Shane ensures that calves receive colostrum and are suckling the cow before turnout. So far no incidences of scour have been seen and calves remain healthy outdoors.

Urea is being spread on the farm at a rate of 23 units per acre on all covers above 800-900kg DM/ha. Slurry is applied to bare paddocks at a rate of 2,000 gallons per acre to supply P, K and a small amount of early N. Heavy covers on wetter parts of the farm will be targeted for grazing first while ground is relatively dry, with drier paddocks being saved for later in the season in case land gets wet.

Upcoming events

Teagasc, in conjunction with the *Irish Farmers Journal*, will be running two farm walks in April on BETTER Farm Beef Challenge farms. The first will take place on Maurice Hearne's farm in Dunmore East, Co. Waterford on Tuesday, April 4 at 2.00pm. Maurice has a 110-cow autumn-calving suckler herd, with bull calves finished under 16 months and heifers finished off grass.

The second walk is on Richard Milligan's farm in Robertstown, Co. Kildare on Tuesday, April 11 at 1.00pm. Richard is running a 40-cow suckler herd but also buys in 40-50 Hereford-cross calves from dairy herds to finish in a dairy calf to beef system. The focus of both farm walks is grassland management, breeding and herd health and all are welcome to attend.

RESEARCH UPDATE

Charolais more efficient



Mark McGee and David Kenny of AGRIC, Teagasc Grange analysed the feed efficiency of suckler-bred Charolais compared to dairy-bred Holstein-Friesian steers.



Feed-efficient cattle are central to the economic and environmental sustainability of beef farming enterprises. Due to the abolition of milk quotas, the subsequent expansion of the Irish dairy herd has meant that proportionately more beef is derived from dairy-bred compared to suckler-bred animals. In this context, a recent Grange study compared the intake, growth and feed efficiency of suckler-bred Charolais (CH, three-quarter bred or greater) with dairy origin Holstein-Friesian (HF) steers individually offered zero-grazed grass, and subsequently a high-concentrate finishing diet. The HF steers were 24 days older than the CHs, which reflects the mean calving dates of the national dairy and suckler cow herds. For the zero-grazed grass phase, the HF steers were 80kg lighter and had a 70g/day lower growth rate compared to CHs. Despite this, HF steers consumed 4% more grass dry matter (DM) daily, resulting in a 10% poorer

feed conversion ratio (FCR – kg DM intake/kg liveweight gain) than the CHs. Likewise, in the finishing phase, the older, lighter, slower-growing HF steers consumed 10% more feed DM resulting in a 20% inferior FCR than the CHs. At slaughter, carcass fat score was similar (9.9, scale 1-15) for both breed types, but kill-out proportion (6 percentage units lower), carcass weight (84kg lighter) and carcass conformation score (6 units poorer, scale 1-15) were considerably inferior for HF steers compared to CHs. Due to the lower kill-out proportion and lower estimated meat proportion in the carcass of HF steers compared to CHs, during the finishing phase HF steers consumed approximately 33% and 50% more feed DM/kg carcass and meat gain, respectively, than CHs. Clearly, this breed difference in feed efficiency is a substantial cost to beef farmers. Additionally, it has implications for farm stocking rate and environmental footprint.