Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Programme

Update your spring rotation planner and GET FERTILISER OUT

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Things are finally looking up here in the east with cattle beginning to appear out on the driest of paddocks. The wet weather has really messed up our spring rotation planner and we now need to update it. If we leave it as is with the end of our first rotation on the 10th of April or "Magic Day" it is leaving the first rotation very short, only 23 days.

That means if we graze a paddock today and want to go back and graze it @ 1250kg DM in 23 days, growth rates would have to be on average 54kg DM/day, this is unachievable. However if we push out the start of the second rotation by 10 days we will need an average growth rate of 38kg DM/day over the next 33 days, which should be manageable.

Now we have to re-adjust our spring rotation planner to reflect this. If I have 100 acres to graze in 33 days that's 3 acres per day, can you manage this? There will need to be a balance between getting paddocks grazed off to have grass there for the second rotation on the 20th of April and getting silage closed up.

We still need to graze 25-30% of our grazing ground first to have grass for the start of the second rotation so graze the low covers first 800kg – 1000kg DM, then move into silage. You may need to leave some silage ground un-grazed and cut early to end the first rotation on time. This plan will need updating as we go.

Fertiliser

The application of fertiliser will be critical, there are several different scenarios out there, but what should you do now?

No fertiliser applied at all: Apply 1.5 bags of 18-6-12 to the whole farm as soon as ground in travelable, check your nutrient management plan to ensure you stay within the limits, if 18-6-12 is not allowed use protected urea. Go on driest paddocks first and follow up with the wetter ones as they dry. The target is 27 units of nitrogen and the P&K will help give you an extra jump in growth. On heavily stocked farms follow up with 23-30 units of Urea or protected urea in the following 3-4 weeks. Keep your slurry and apply to the silage ground after it is grazed.

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Slurry applied on some ground, no fertiliser applied: Do the same as above, however, if possible use the fields you applied slurry to as silage ground, so as not to waste the potassium. With a very short rotation we need all the push we can get. If you have high P soils you could apply 30 units of straight nitrogen to the fields that got slurry.

½ bag of urea applied to 50% of the farm in January. Apply 1.5 bags of 18-6-12 to all fields as they become travelable as long as your nutrient management planner allows, always watch your nitrates limits, if not use protected urea. The urea will have grown the grass that is there now but the 18-6-12 will grow the grass you will need in 3 weeks' time.

The aim now is to have between 50 and 70 units of Nitrogen applied by the middle of April.

Heavy ground

While cattle are starting to head out in the east, in the west we are a week to ten days behind which will push our turn out date into the first week of April which changes the advice to be given. Most paddocks have good covers due to early housing so the reality here is that most of the silage ground will not be grazed this year and should be closed fertilised and cut in Mid-May.

When turned out stock should graze 20-30% of the lighter covers (800-1000kg DM/ha) first and get through this fast and get it growing. This will also provide an area for slurry to be applied, and then head into the heavier covers. The problem here will be that the rotation will be only 21-26 days, but soil temperatures should be up and grass growth rates will be on the rise and very close to demand.

Fertiliser will be key, apply 1.5 bags of 18-6-12 to all paddocks, including those with heavier covers, this will grow the grass you need in three weeks' time as long as your nutrient management planner allows, always watch your nitrates limits, if not use protected urea. As tanks are nearly full, spreading slurry with a dribble bar or trailing shoe may be the best option. Apply a further 23 units of nitrogen in the form of urea or protected Urea on top of the slurry.