

# Grazing on a plate

The phenomenal grass growth that can be achieved in Ireland is our key competitive advantage. These beef farmers use platemeters to manage their paddocks and grass covers. **Mark Moore** reports

**D**airy farmers have a huge advantage when it comes to managing grass.

They get almost instant feedback on how well they are managing their paddocks. Yield, fat and protein levels based on milk recording or feedback from the processor are rapidly available.

For the drystock farmer the benefits, though less immediately visible, are equally worth having.

“Basically, you’re getting more animal performance from the cheapest feed available to you,” says David

Kinsella, who is a member of the New Ross Discussion Group. The group was established by Teagasc advisor Michael Fitzgerald and a dozen or so local farmers about eight years ago, and is today facilitated by Martina Harrington of the Teagasc Ennisclorthy office.

“We try to move forward and make progress each year,” says David Kinsella. “At the beginning, we were rotational-grazing and gradually we increased our use of paddocks. We started by judging grass covers by eye, but we now use a plate meter which is a much more accurate system.”



Alan Keogh, David Kinsella, John Watchhorn and Jimmy Dempsey.



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David has a 70-cow suckler herd and finishes all the progeny. His animals include Charolais, Simmental and Limousin blood. "The farm is fragmented and we have four groups of stock: two groups of cows and one group of bullocks and one of heifers. Splitting the herd also helps with breeding management. All cows are artificially inseminated. By reseeding and keeping the fertiliser and pH levels right, we have been able to gradually increase our stocking rates," he says.

The group doesn't really call itself the New Ross Discussion Group. "But that's how we are identified on PastureBase Ireland," says John Watchorn, another group member.

"The system allows us to use the Teagasc Spring Rotation Planner and other programmes relatively easily."

The group will meet regularly during the grazing season and discuss whether paddock rotation is going according to plan. All will bring the



most up-to-date covers to the meeting.

David Kinsella says it's vital to establish a rigorous routine: "You should measure on the same day each week and ideally at the same time.

"Stock are rarely more than two days in a paddock and the group will aim to have animals out by 1 February and have done a complete rotation of the farm by 1 April," says Martina Harrington. "By managing tightly, they are getting more and better quality grass."

"I'd say the biggest benefit from using the platometer is that it gives you the confidence to be a bit braver," says group member Jimmy Dempsey. "In the past, we'd always want to have a lot of grass in the bank whereas as when you have a very accurate picture of what's in each paddock you don't need to do that. If there is any surplus or deficit looming, you will know it far quicker when you are measuring and you can take action if needed."

**Table 1:** Some target pasture covers for a spring-calving herd stocked at 2.5 LU/ha

Month	Growth target	Avg farm cover	Event
15 Mar	15	600-700	Cattle out full-time
10 May	80	700-800	Expect supply to exceed demand
15 Aug	65.0	700-800	
1 Sept	51.0	1,100-1,200	

Month	Growth target	Avg farm cover	Event
15 Sept	37.1	1,200	Peak cover achieved
1 Oct	30.0	1,000	
15 Oct	26.8	900	Start to close paddocks for winter
1 Nov	15.0	700	Consider housing finishing cattle
15 Nov	8.5	650	
22 Nov	2.7	600	House by day and night

## Key principles

### Extend the grazing season in early spring and late autumn

- Turn animals out early, to an adequate grass supply, to achieve a long grazing season and increase total animal liveweight gain from pasture.
- Have a planned autumn closing date for paddocks.
- Close the farm in rotation from mid to late October onwards.
- Target about two-thirds of paddocks closed by early November.
- Do not regraze closed paddocks, if yield is below 700kg DM/ha.
- Target a closing farm cover of 500kg DM/ha.
- Consider housing some animals during periods of poor weather.

### For suckler herds, match calving pattern to the start of the grass growing season.

- Begin calving at the onset of grass growth.
- Target an opening farm cover of

600kg to 700kg DM/ha (depending on stocking rates) and graze the whole farm during the first grazing cycle.

- Use the Teagasc spring rotation planner and stick to daily area allocations as planned.
- Aim to have the silage areas grazed by 4 to 6 April. Then move stock to the grazing area.

### Maximise the productivity of your swards by improving soil fertility

- Soil-sample one-fifth of the farm each year. If there has been no sampling for many years, consider getting the whole farm sampled.
- Apply P, K and lime as recommended.
- Consider reseeding poor performing paddocks.
- Only use varieties on the recommended list.
- Graze the newly reseeded sward for the first time before it reaches 1,000kg DM/ha.

### Match your stocking rate to the growth potential of your swards

- Perennial ryegrass dominated swards will produce the highest grass yields.
- You must have enough stock for a field's grass growth (match supply and demand).
- Don't waste grass.
- Use rotational grazing, strip grazing or block grazing. This will help you improve grass utilisation.

### Use farm grass cover measurement and grass budgeting, during the year

- Consider housing stock in very wet conditions if soil damage is taking place and grass utilisation is poor.
- Graze-out paddocks to a low post grazing height in early spring. This will maximise grass utilization and "condition" swards to produce more grass during subsequent grazing rotations, while also improving sward quality.