Early grazing: it's not just for spring calvers

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Increased milk solids, reduced silage and concentrate costs and better subsequent sward quality are proven benefits from early turnout. Teagasc Moorepark analysis of farm data indicates a further potential gain of 25% to 35% extra spring grass growth from better early season management. Many farmers who turn their cows out early report a reduced spring workload and more grazing days.

There has been a perception, however, that winter-calving herds, with high feed demand in spring, and herds on heavier soil types, do not gain to the same extent. On-farm experience is showing that the potential benefits are just as great for such farms.

The Johnstown Castle herd

Herd manager Aidan Lawless has been early grazing the 140-cow Teagasc Johnstown Castle winter milk herd over the last 10 years and has had to manage various trial stocking rates and calving patterns. The spring rotation planner gives the basic outline in each situation, according to Aidan:

Aidan Lawless, herd manager.

"Some tweaks to management are made along the way."

"There have been a number of different combinations run here over the years," explains Aidan, "from 100% autumn calving and buffer feeding to autumn and spring calving at lower stocking rates. At the moment, we have 'block autumn', 'block spring', and 50:50 split calving systems in place. For all systems, we find that getting cows out to early grass and using a spring rotation plan as a template is very important."

The goal? "The main aim is always to set up the grazing block to have plenty of quality grass from mid-April and into the later rounds," says Aidan. "We are trying to kickstart clean new growth by cleaning off paddocks in rotation from early February. Moving cows out to grass early means that the first areas grazed have a long interval to recover, and this helps to ensure we have enough grass for the second round. Having around 40% grazed by early March is a working target."

The varying stocking rates and calving patterns result in quite different demands for grass in spring, so how is management adjusted to cope with this? "The first thing to say is that the targets of grazing 35% to 40% of the area by early March and 70% by St Patrick's Day don't change. After that, it is a case of budgeting out the available grass using quality silage and concentrate to fill the gaps."

For the block autumn calving herd, for example, all cows are calved and the average daily feed intake is 20kg DM in early February. This creates a very high feed demand in February. "To manage this, we stick to the plan for area grazed per week, which usually means grazing by day only until early March," says Aidan. "The cows will get at least 5kg to 6kg grass DM per grazing to minimise poaching, after morning milking. The rest of the herd's diet is fed indoors, with silage feeding adjusted depending on grass allocation."

Grass allowance

"Once daily grass allowance increases the cows will be out for two grazings per day through mid-March and are finally out full-time during the last one third of the first round.

"This contrasts with the spring or 50:50 split-calving groups, which need to be out full-time earlier in order to get enough area grazed," notes Aidan. "But when you look at each farm in mid-April, the grass situation should be close to identical on each one."

Aidan also highlights that correct autumn closing is essential for early grazing. "We closed the farm on 11

Michael Malone assesses early spring covers with Killian Brennan, Kilcogy, Co Cavan.

> Killian plans to have cows grazing by 10 February this year and have one third of the farm grazed by early March
>
> **– Cian Devanney, dairy advisor, Ballyhaise**

HEAVY SOILS

"There's mixed opinion on the idea of early grazing," says Michael Malone, of the Teagasc Lakeland Joint Programme. "Some farmers have already bought into it; some will not entertain the idea – they have their own reasons, and some are willing to give it a go but need some practical help to get things moving. We prioritise these guys because we feel time with them will be time well-spent."

Michael says that the main barriers to achieving more days at grass in spring are similar on farms across the region. "It comes down to the same few issues nearly every time," he argues. "Applying spring nitrogen early is probably the number one issue. It can be a struggle to promote application of 70-plus units of N by 1 April because the response is not immediately visible, but local farm data confirms the value of this practice."

After that, the issue of poaching and a perception of increased workload with strip grazing are common issues. "There is no doubting the extra poaching risk on some of the farms further north and west in the catchment area," Michael says. "But I think there is a real need for objective assessment of what level ground damage is acceptable, and what isn't. We certainly don't want to be reducing annual growth by poaching high-risk paddocks. We have used the Ballyhaise farm to demonstrate recovery of grass on some ground marked during the first round of grazing, and there are real lessons for guys here."

The farmers on heavy soils who are striving for more days at grass also recognise the value of good field infrastructure. "Lack of investment in roadways and water to make grazing access easier and reduce poaching is another issue locally," says Michael. "In a wet spring, it's very tempting to just close the shed door behind the cows in the morning and wait a few weeks – farms that have invested in infrastructure are more likely to move on grazing in marginal conditions, at least by day. For heavy farms, the distance from any point in the paddock to a roadway access point should be no more than 150m."

So does Michael see progress being made on early spring grazing? "I definitely think so. The first and most important thing is that we are seeing more and more middle-ground farmers willing to give it a go. One of our clients describes early grazing as akin to doing heavy training with his football team in January. "It is tough going and not enjoyable at the time, but you will get the rewards for the rest of the year."

November at an average farm cover of around 680kg DM per hectare.

The wedge chart (Figure 1) showed me that there were four or five paddocks that could have been grazed given the good weather conditions, but we stuck to the plan and walked away to have grass for the spring.

"We will have an opening cover close to 800kg DM per ha and this will help to get grazing off to a good start. We have seen over the years that closing earlier and with a high cover is needed for winter milking herds in order to have enough grass to cope with extra spring demand.

"So some adjustment is needed in autumn as well as spring for these systems."

Figure 1

Closing covers for the Johnstown dairy unit (block autumn herd), November 2016