

Grazing coaches building grass management skills

New specialised discussion groups are helping farmers to gain the skills and confidence to become highly successful grass managers

Kay O'Connell
Teagasc Dairy Advisor, Gorey

Shane Doyle, a dairy farmer from Gorey, Co Wexford, says: "There's nothing wrong with feeding concentrates at €180/t but when you can get the same feed value from a tonne of grass at €70 it seems obvious to me that you should maximise your production and use of grass. Shane has been measuring and managing his grass for about five years and he credits improved grass management for increasing his grass utilisation.

Teagasc data presented at the recent Teagasc dairy conference showed that every extra tonne of grass dry matter utilised per hectare increases profit per hectare by €180. On average, National Farm Survey farms utilised 7.1t of grass dry matter per hectare per year between 2008 and 2015, which is significantly lower than the 11.6t DM/ha/year utilised on Teagasc research farms.

So why the gap? A recent Teagasc/UCD study on the reasons for the low uptake of grass measurement technology on dairy farms by Teagasc Walsh Fellow Paul Newman found that while 92% of farmers surveyed were aware of and were interested in grass measurement technology, just 14% measured grass on their farms.

The study found that focused support for farmers making the transition to full grass measurement, possibly through the formation of a grass budgeting group, increased adoption of grassland measurement from 14% to 34%. Shane Doyle is the host farmer in his Teagasc grass budgeting group, a group offering focused support on grass measurement.



In spring 2016, a Teagasc Pasture-Base Ireland initiative called "Grazing Coaches" invited dairy farmers to join a local grass budgeting group. It was targeted at farmers interested in up-skilling themselves in grazing management, measuring grass and increasing grass dry matter production level on their farm. A two-hour monthly meeting would be dedicated to grassland management.

In north Wexford, local Teagasc dairy advisor Kay O'Connell, Shane Doyle and up to 15 local farmers meet on Shane's farm monthly. Each meeting includes a farm walk to estimate paddock covers; data entry on to PastureBase Ireland, and agreement on grassland management decisions for the week ahead.

Once grass measurements are uploaded, the PastureBase programme creates a grass wedge for the farm along with important figures including grass growth, cover/cow, average farm cover, daily demand and target pre-grazing covers. The grass wedge is then used to help make decisions for the following week.

The group met 11 times on the host farm between February and November 2016 with an average of 13 attend-

ing each meeting. Most of the group are dairy farmers who were already in discussion groups but wanted a specific grass-budgeting course to learn or enhance their grass measurement and budgeting skills. The group members come mainly from Gorey but some travel from south of Enniscorthy and across the county bounds from Co Wicklow.

The host farmers are Shane and his wife Margaret. In 2016, they milked 220 crossbred cows on their 75ha milking platform in Churchtown, Gorey. In 2015, they utilised 11.2t of grass dry matter per hectare. Shane was selected as a grazing coach as he was measuring grass on a weekly basis and was a confident grassland manager with a good understanding of the principles of grassland management.

Shane learned grass measurement and budgeting skills by attending an earlier grass budgeting group. Prior to this, like many farms a lot of the terminology was lost on him.

Shane says: "It came to a head one day when I stood at a general dairy discussion group and heard two farmers and Kay discussing grass figures

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such as cover per cow, growth rate per day, demand per hectare, etc, and realised I only understood 30% of the conversation.” At the end of that meeting, he asked: “Is there a grass budgeting group I can join?” and he hasn't looked back since.

The terminology can be off-putting when you're starting out. “You need to give yourself a year or two to get comfortable with it and, above all, stick with it because grass management gets much easier over time.”

Shane says: “It is important to allow time after walking the farm to calculate farm cover and to make decisions based on the information collected. There is no point collecting data if you do not use it to make decisions.” Unlike most discussion groups, the grass measurement group always meet on the same farm rather than rotating around each member's farm.

Peter Hill, who farms a few miles away from Shane, said: “By visiting Shane's farm every month, we could see how he dealt with grass shortages and surpluses during the year.” Peter had been interested in budgeting for a few years but found it hard to put into practice.

“By seeing how tightly he was grazing, I gained the confidence to get the cows to clean out the paddocks better and it paid off. My milk solids were better in April and May than ever before.

“Going to the group meetings allows you to see first-hand how you should be managing the grass and like most people for me seeing is believing,” said John Earle from Killenagh who milked 95 cows this year. John's farm is on Macamore soil type – a very heavy gley soil, which differs greatly from the light free-draining soil on Shane's farm.

Despite the differences in drainage on both of their farms, John still sees benefit in attending the group meetings each month.

“The principles of measuring and managing grass are the same regardless of soil type. It simply means making different decisions depending on ground conditions and being flexible.”

The group agrees that it's the same when it comes to breed of cow with the group having a mix of Jersey and Kiwi cross spring-calving herds, and purebred Holsteins producing winter milk. While the group has differing views on the type of cow and system of milk production, all agree with Shane who says that “the cow is purely the tool to convert grass into profit – it's personal preference for each farmer to decide for themselves



what cow type best suits their system, but the focus must be on the fact that grass is our cheapest feed and its use must be maximised.”

Weather

The weather of 2016 was very different in north Wexford to many parts of the west and southwest of Ireland, which had to deal with very wet weather. In Wexford, the most difficult periods occurred with poor growth in April and drought in August. On Shane's farm, growth peaked at 91kg DM per hectare day (/ha/day) in June and dropped as low as 23kg DM/ha/day on 17 August before bouncing back up to 67kg DM/ha/day a month later.

To maintain his 2.9LU/ha stocking rate on grass alone, Shane needs a growth rate of 52kg/ha/day, so weekly grass measuring and budgeting helped him to see the deficit coming and act accordingly. In Shane's case, this meant introducing soya hulls and then baled silage to help reduce his demand for grass until growth rates increased again.

Donal Kennedy farms 49ha and milked 100 cows this year near the Wexford/Wicklow border. “During the drought, I saw Shane using straights to supplement the cows and did the same at home and saved money when compared with feeding a nut, which

is what I would normally do. This was important with low milk price this year, but I would expect to do the same next year at hopefully a higher milk price and save even more money!”

For this group, meal feeding has a place but as a supplement – the focus is on using the cheapest feed available to them which is grass. By implementing what he has learned at the grass group during the year, Donal says he has an added bonus – 380 bales of silage from surplus grass.

“This is not grass that we would have put in with first- or second-cut silage but grass that would have been wasted by grazing covers that were too high,” Donal stresses. These surplus bales are especially important to Donal's liquid milk system as they are high DMD silage which is ideal for milking cows.

Paul Kinsella and Pdraig Doyle farm alongside one another in Tara Hill outside Gorey town.

Paul had been coming to group meetings for a few months before he convinced Pdraig that he should come along too. “I'm really only getting into it now but have worked on setting up the farm for spring 2017 by grazing out tight this autumn,” said Pdraig.

By following an autumn rotation plan and ensuring that he had 60% of



his farm closed in early November, Padraig is confident that he is starting spring 2017 with adequate grass to turn cows out early and keep grass in the diet until the start of the second rotation in early April. Padraig's neighbour, Paul, has been entering his measurements onto PastureBase Ireland each week since getting training with the group in the spring.

"Measuring the grass gives you the weekly growth rate on your farm. Growth rates vary from farm to farm depending on factors such as soil type, fertiliser applications, grass varieties, etc. Knowing the growth rates on my own farm helps me to predict the following week's growth rates with only one factor in mind – the weather. Once you know your grass covers, you will be better able to match supply with the herds demand. Matching supply and demand will ensure that paddocks are grazed out tightly and increase grass utilisation. It's all about trusting the figures."

It takes around three years to become fully confident in grass budgeting, according to Shane, and many members of the group agree. With one year completed, the group's plan for 2017 is to have all group members measuring weekly and entering their figure on to PastureBase, so they can compare figures and learn from each other.

Farmers in the group bring their own data to the meetings.

ADVANTAGES OF GRASS BUDGETING

- Walking the farm each week allows you to see what is happening in each paddock – you can accurately quantify grass growth.
- It helps you manage and maintain grass quality – by identifying grass surpluses and deficits.
- It enables you to work out weekly growth rates (kilos of dry matter per hectare).
- It allows a feed budget to be calculated – when and how much supplement (meal/silage) to feed.
- It makes it possible to calculate how much each paddock grows annually.
- It exposes poorly performing paddocks which need reseeding.

If interested in developing your grass management skills, contact your local Teagasc advisor.



Growth rates vary from farm to farm depending on factors such as soil type, fertiliser applications, grass varieties

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