

sheep

Growing more grass for your sheep flock

You should be aiming to grow 10t of grass dry matter per hectare in 10 grazings across your farm

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Michael Fitzgerald and his son James from Mocharra, Shrule, Co Mayo, hosted one of the Teagasc Grass 10 campaign events in February. Key management components within the campaign include setting up a paddock system, keeping an eye on grass heights or yields and knowing when to move animals into, or out of, a paddock. Father and son say Teagasc advisor Eamonn Patten is a key member of the team.

The Fitzgerald farm consists of 25ha divided into four blocks. They run a flock of 130 mid-season lambing ewes and keep 35 to 40 replacements each year. Ewes are stocked at 11 per hectare and typically wean 1.6 lambs per ewe mated. All progeny other than replacements are taken to slaughter and output per ewe is over 70kg of liveweight. Grass is key to these achievements.

Grass for early spring

"We close paddocks in good time and in rotation from late October onwards," says Michael Fitzgerald. "The paddocks will have been grazed out well and quickly in the autumn. This allows them maximum time to recover."

Closing date has a significant bearing on the amount of grass available in spring. Table 1 shows the difference in grass cover available in spring when fields were closed on two different dates in autumn for two different farms.

Closing in mid- to late October results in significantly more grass

available in mid-February than for fields not closed until late November. Ideally, fields should be closed for a rest period of 120 days or four months over the winter.

Fertiliser

"The second key factor is fertiliser, in particular nitrogen (N)," says Michael. "In late January, we spread almost 30kg N per hectare (23 units per acre). We need to use a higher level for the second rotation as we are stocked at over 10 ewes/ha.

"This nitrogen helps deliver grass for the first grazing rotation and also helps get growth going quickly once it is grazed off. The combination of resting and fertiliser application should result in having an average farm cover of 5cm to 6cm (600kg to 700kg DM/ha) when we start to turn out sheep after lambing."

To get the best value for your nitrogen, it is important that the basic soil fertility in terms of phosphorous (P), potassium (K) and soil pH (lime status) is optimum. If soil samples indicate P or K levels are below optimum, slurry or a compound fertiliser, such as 18:6:12, pasture sward or some other compound will help rectify the deficiency.

What is grass worth?

One kilogramme of nitrogen yields approximately 12kg of grass dry matter. If urea costs €350/t, this puts the cost of the 1kg of nitrogen and, therefore 12kg of grass, at 76c. When concentrates cost €300/t, the cost of 12kg of dry matter is €3.46. Which would you prefer – 12kg of grass dry matter for 76c or 12kg of dry matter of meal at €3.46? I would take the grass, thank you.

Grass for the second rotation

The next challenge is to make sure you have adequate quality grass for the second and subsequent rotations. The aim should be to have enough grass to feed ewes until grass growth rate picks up to match demand. The day this occurs is often referred to as 'magic day'. It occurs around 14 April,



but may be slightly earlier depending on what part of the country you're in. Every effort should be made to make sure you have adequate grass to get you to that date in the first rotation.

Working the percentages

Teagasc researcher Philip Creighton says that farmers should aim to have 20% of the ground grazed by mid-March and 40% by the end of March. This 40% will then be rested, getting time to recover, with enough grass available for the ewe flock for the second rotation. The remaining 60% will be grazed during the first two weeks of April when demands from ewes and lambs are increasing rapidly in line with peak milk yields.

Sheep are regularly stocked lightly and spread out over a large part of the farm for the first couple of weeks after lambing. However, from late March, they should be grouped together. This reduces the number of



Michael Fitzgerald and his son James farm at Mocharra, Shrule, Co Mayo.

groups of animals and will facilitate grazing paddocks more quickly, providing the opportunity for faster regrowth.

The aim should be for the first and second rotation to graze tightly to 3.5cm to 4cm.

This will ensure a leafy regrowth will be available when lambs start to graze and help ewes maximise milk production during this critical five- to six-week period.

“The key to managing grass for the remainder of the year is to have adequate divisions,” says Michael Fitzgerald.

“The minimum should be five permanent divisions per group of sheep. By having larger groups, you will have less groups, and therefore need fewer divisions overall. We’ll further divide the five permanent divisions per group with an electric fence, particularly during periods of rapid grass growth.”

CONCLUSION

Managing grass carefully, enabling you to graze out small areas of land in not more than three days will directly increase the overall amount of grass you grow throughout the year. This will help you achieve the target of 10 tons of grass dry matter per hectare in 10 grazing’s throughout your farm.



The aim should be to have enough grass to feed ewes until grass growth rate picks up to match demand

Table 1:

Farm	Field number	Date closed	Grass yield in mid- Feb (kg DM/ha (cm))
Farm 1	Field A	10th October	1,200 (8-9)
	Field B	20th November	125 (4)
Farm 2	Field A	Late October	1,300 (8-9)
	Field B	Late November	150 (4)

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