

Setting up the farm for spring 2019

Careful paddock management is key to ensuring you make the most of your grass this autumn and next spring

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The decisions we make this autumn will have a huge impact on grass availability in spring 2019. With grass available, calved cows can be let out to feed on fresh grass and concentrates. No need for silage.

Every extra day at grass in the spring is worth €2 to €3 per animal/day. So for a herd of 100 animals, 10 extra days at grass next spring is worth €2,000 to €3,000. This benefit from grazing can be twice as great where fodder is scarce and expensive.

Autumn grazing management plays a huge role in how much grass you will have next spring. Every extra day at grass in the autumn is also valuable – worth €2/head/day, so we must try to keep grass in the diet of our animals for as long as possible, without affecting grass supply next spring.

So the objectives for farmers over the remainder of the grazing season are to:

- Keep grass in the diet of livestock for as long as possible.
- Close off paddocks in good time so they will have good quantities of grass next spring.

How to close the farm

To close off the farm, we generally use the 60:40 autumn planner. The target is to have 60% of the farm grazed and closed in early November and to graze the remaining 40% during November.

Farmers with heavy soils will have to start closing earlier (e.g. Teagasc

Ballyhaise starts closing paddocks on 25 September) and must close off most of the farm by 31 October. A dry farm should start closing in the first week of October. The target closing cover on farms should be at least 600kg DM/ha (preferably 650kg DM/ha). If you can achieve this, you have a good chance of starting next year with a substantial opening cover (depending on growth rates over the winter).

Example one: closing cover 650kg DM/ha on 15 November. Growth rate of 3kg DM/day over the winter period. Seventy-eight days from 15 November to 1 February:

Closing cover: 650kg DM/ha + (3kg DM/ha growth rate x 78 days) = 884kg DM/ha. Opening cover: 1 February.

Farmers should keep the following in mind when closing off the farm:

- Put a plan in place. For example, if you have 100 acres and you plan to have 60 acres closed by the first of November, you must graze and close 15 acres per week during the month of October. So you might graze and close 15 acres by 10 October, another 15 acres by 17 October, another 15 acres by 24 October and the final 15 acres by 31 October.

On heavy land you will be aiming to have 60% closed by the end of October. So the paddocks will be closed a week earlier i.e. starting on 3 October.

- Once a paddock is closed, do not re-graze it, as it will reduce grass supply for next spring. There may be a strong temptation to graze in late (November/December) if fodder is short. This approach will defeat the strategy of ensuring a supply of early spring grass. Spring grass is much more valuable than autumn grass.
- Dry paddocks with good grass covers close to the yard are especially precious in the spring. So make certain that these dry paddocks are grazed and closed early so that they have grass on them next spring (it's frustrating in the spring to have grass on paddocks with heavy soil and possibly poor ground conditions.). Make sure these precious paddocks also have multiple access and water points

to further minimise possible damage in the spring.

- Farms with low grass supply: if you have a low grass supply on your farm this autumn, supplement to extend the grazing season and to keep at least some grazed grass in the diet of your animals for as long as possible. Do not graze the farm quickly and run out of grass, as it will result in an even earlier housing date.

Autumn grazing management:

The following are some grazing tips to maximise grass utilisation on our farms this autumn, while also keeping one eye on spring 2019:

- Extend the rotation in September and October: operate a rotation length of 35 days (30 days minimum). This means cattle return to the same paddock after 30 to 35 days. This will keep at least some grass in the diet of your animals.

- For the final round, which is likely to start in early October, extend the rotation to 45 days so animals will have gone through all the paddocks in 45 days (leaving the last one in mid-November.) If conditions deteriorate make every effort (by using strip grazing for example) to keep cows at grass.

- Walk the farm weekly to monitor farm grass covers. Make sure to keep grass in the diet of animals for the remainder of the grazing season. Supplement levels will depend on growth rates and farm grass supply. To avoid running out of grass completely, reduce demand (by cutting stock numbers or increasing supplementation levels). Heavier animals can be housed and lighter animals left outside. If grass growth rates are low you may have to supplement. Supplement with concentrates to save your silage for the winter.

- If silage is to be included in the diet, animals can graze during the day and go in at night to avoid damage the ground.
- Remember demand is in your control, growth rates will be variable.
- It is crucial that we clean out paddocks well to stimulate growth over the winter and spring. So continue to graze paddocks down to 4cm throughout the autumn (grass should be 4cm when animals are leaving the paddock).
- If you don't graze to 4cm, dead material will lie dormant over the winter and inhibit growth.
- Good grazing infrastructure is crucial to maximising grass utilisation,

particularly in wet weather. Strip-grazing can help to minimise damage and ensure the correct amount of area/grass is allocated to stock through the autumn.

- Make sure to keep grass in the diet of animals for as long as possible,

while closing up to ensure sufficient grass supply on farms next spring. Extending the grazing season in autumn and spring will increase profits and make the most of scarce fodder.

Autumn grazing targets: farm cover, cover/LU and rotation length

Date	Cover/cow (Kg DM)	Average farm cover (Kg DM/ha)	Rotation length
STOCKING RATE OF 2.5 LU/HA			
Mid-September	400-450	1,000-1,100	35 days
1 October	400	1,000	40 days
1 November	60% of your grazing platform should be closed for spring at this stage		
Fully housed		550-600	
STOCKING RATE OF 3.0 LU/HA			
Mid-September	370	1,100	35 days
1 October	380	1,150	40 days
1 November	60% of your grazing platform should be closed for spring at this stage		
Fully housed		600-650	
STOCKING RATE OF 3.5 LU/HA			
Mid-September	340	1200	35 days
1 October	335	1175	40 days
1 November	70% of your grazing platform should be closed for Spring at this stage		
Fully housed		700-750	

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