

A dreadful start but the game is far from over

Only 10% of grass is produced up to mid-April so a good main season growth will help compensate. Slurry and bagged fertiliser are key.

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Weather conditions in the early part of the year have been unusually wet and cold. Grass production in mid-April had only reached 50% of normal (see grass growth curve). Grazing conditions were also poor. The pits are bare. So the race is on to rebuild silage stocks and hopefully some reserve silage too.

The good news from a grass pro-

duction perspective is that only 10% of annual grass production occurs before mid-April. Fortunately, grass production picked up since then. About two-thirds (66%) of the grass produced for the year grows between mid-April and mid-August.

This is the time to metaphorically "make hay" and grow as much grass as possible so we can graze the animals and make more silage.

Slurry and fertiliser

If you want to increase both grass and silage production you must make efficient use of slurry and fertiliser. Too much slurry is being spread late in the year. This "fertiliser" is not being used efficiently as grass/silage production is lower later in the season.

Slurry should be applied to the ground directly after it is cut for silage in late May/early June.

Equally, grazing ground requires fertiliser P and K applications because:

- Our national soil fertility status is poor, and
- The grass plant had a difficult autumn (in 2017) and a difficult spring (2018) so the plant needs the nutrients

Figure 1

Grass growth curve for 2016-2018 inclusive

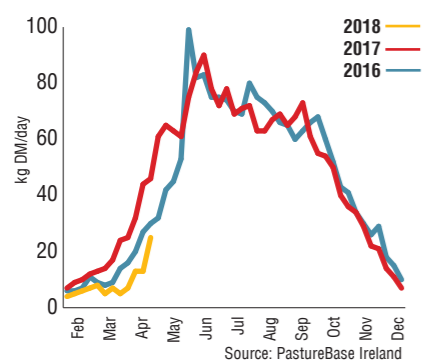
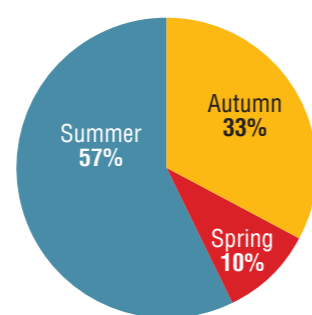


Figure 2

The proportion of grass produced, by season



Source: PastureBase Ireland



to repair itself. P and K applications are essential for this recovery.

There will also be a much greater response to sulphur (S) application than in the past. So apply 15 to 20 units/acre of sulphur by July on grazing ground and about half of this on silage ground.

Extra grass

If we can grow extra grass on the farm, this can be harvested as surplus grass and made into silage (either pit or bales). For this to happen though, the level of grassland management needs to improve. Put huge effort into ensuring that animals are entering paddocks with covers of 1,300kg to 1,600kg DM/ha.

Ask yourself the question: if I am continually topping, am I wasting feed? If a paddock/field is too strong for grazing, skip it and use the next paddock. The paddock to be topped should be cut for round bales instead.

Increase in grass growth

There is often a good recovery in grass growth after a slow spring. This happened in 2013 and again in 2016. Growth rates of as high as 100kg DM/ha/day were recorded on the grass growth curve from Pasture-

Base Ireland, as can be seen from the graph.

This was due to an improvement in the weather but also a response to fertiliser in the soil which had not been used in the early spring. Even though the growth of grass was poor during spring 2016, more grass was grown for the year as a whole than in 2015 and 2014.

Tight grazing: the benefits for grass quality

The spring of 2013 was similar to this spring. While not as much rain fell, it was colder particularly in April and grass growth was slow. A consequence of this was that every single blade of grass was needed during April and May of that year.

However, subsequent grass quality was excellent. This improvement in

grass quality was reflected in mid-season milk protein content. Figure 3 demonstrates the milk protein content in the month of June for the 10-year period from 2005 to 2014 inclusive. It is clear that the highest milk protein was recorded in 2013.

Too many animals on the farm?

Another way of increasing the amount of silage available next winter is to carry fewer animals into the winter.

In recent times, there has been expansion on many dairy farms and greater animal numbers. This increases the requirement for forage, so either more grass/silage must be grown or more land taken to increase fodder supply. Any farmer who was short of silage this spring must ask him/herself how many animals should I carry into next winter: Selling animals before the winter will also improve cashflow.

Dairy farmers, in particular, have been tight on feed this spring. Does it make sense to carry beef animals, surplus replacements, cull cows, poor performing cows, etc, into the winter if feed supply is tight with no reserve of silage?

If soil fertility is limiting on the existing farm, this will compromise grass/silage production. Investing in more P, K and lime to increase grass production will make more sense than renting additional land at great expense.

The average level of grass production on the best farms in the country is 14t grass DM/ha (according to PastureBase Ireland). This allows a stocking rate of 2.5 cows/ha (1 LU/acre) or 210kg organic N/ha to be carried on the whole farm without the need to purchase forage.

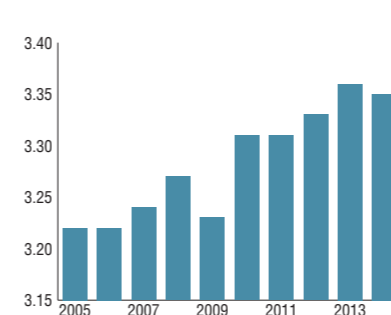
Any increase in stocking rate beyond this for the whole farm will require forage to be purchased assuming that 14t grass DM/ha have, indeed, been grown.

Key messages

- It's mostly still all to play for. Ninety per cent of annual grass production occurs after mid-April. So a lot of grass can still be grown for grazing and silage despite the slow start to the year.
- Make sure that paddocks are well grazed out and grass quality will be improved in subsequent rotations.
- Apply slurry to land after first cut silage to replenish P and K levels. Many farms did not get the opportunity to do this in early spring.
- The first step to ensuring you have adequate silage available for feeding next winter is to review the number of animals to be wintered.

Figure 3

Milk protein % in the month of June



Source: PastureBase Ireland