

Teagasc Fodder Survey July 2020 – National picture secure but 10% of farms have significant deficits

Joe Patton

Dairy specialist, Teagasc Animal and Grassland Research and Innovation Programme.



Over the last number of weeks, Teagasc advisors have completed almost 700 winter fodder budgets for dry-stock and dairy clients nationwide. This was carried out as part of a new initiative to promote better feed security planning on livestock farms.

Budgets were completed using the fodder budget function on Pasture-Base Ireland (www.pbi.ie) and were collated by region:

- **Midlands/north-east:** Cavan, Dublin, Kildare, Laois, Longford, Louth, Meath, Monaghan, Offaly, Westmeath.
- **South-east:** Carlow, Kilkenny, Tipperary, Waterford, Wexford, Wicklow.
- **South-west:** Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick.
- **North-west:** Donegal, Galway, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, Sligo.

The national picture shows dry-stock farms reporting a moderate total surplus of 17% (total feed stocks minus total requirements for the sample farms), while dairy farms are similarly well placed at 12% total surplus.

As always however, there is huge

variation within enterprises and regions.

Feed budget data by region

Table 1 presents the data by region and enterprise. Here it is shown that dairy farms in the Midland North-east region have a small deficit of 3.8% overall, equivalent to six days feeding in winter. This is consistent with emergence of a short-term drought earlier in the summer – many dairy farms in this region had to graze first-cut crops and reported light yields at cutting.

Nonetheless, drystock farms have remained in surplus. All other regions report that farms in both enterprise categories have surplus feed on average.

Farms with significant feed deficits

Previous experience of fodder shortage has shown that farms with deficits of greater than 20% at onset of winter face significant practical and financial difficulties feeding their stock. Despite the overall positive position reported in this year's survey, 9% of dairy farms had a deficit greater than 20% of winter requirements.

The average deficit of this group was 85t DM, or approximately 350t fresh silage at standard dry matter.



Similarly, 12% of drystock farms had a deficit greater than 20% of winter requirements. The average deficit for this group was 33t DM, or approximately 140t fresh silage at standard dry matter.

There was no clear pattern of scale, location or enterprise to characterize farms with >20% feed deficits. This indicates that individual farm management decisions, not weather or land type issues, are the primary factor determining feed budget balances.

Targeting better feed security on livestock farms

Teagasc recommends carrying a rolling winter feed surplus of 25-30% to insulate against weather shocks. Results of the survey show that many farms are approaching this level, which is welcome. There is still, however, a cohort of farms struggling to balance the books for winter feed in a good year.

It is unlikely that these farms will face significant fodder availability problems this year, given the national situation.

However, there is a significant risk to feed security in years of adverse weather conditions. It is very important that farms in this situation develop plans to improve fodder balances.

The key steps are likely to include:

Table 1: Winter feed balance by region and enterprise July 2020

Enterprise	Region	Winter fodder balance %	Approx. days short
Dairy	Midlands north-east	96.22	6
Dairy	North-west	106.4	-
Dairy	South-east	118.1	-
Dairy	South-west	120.6	-
Drystock	Midlands North-east	113.6	-
Drystock	North-west	121.1	-
Drystock	South-east	123.5	-
Drystock	South-west	127.9	-

Case Study – Gene O'Rourke, Co Cavan



- Improving soil fertility (P, K and lime) status.
- Reseeding unproductive swards.
- Planning for an earlier first-cut of silage to boost annual forage yield and quality.
- Adjusting whole farm stocking rate to match grass growth capacity.
- Securing longer-term lease or feed contract arrangements.

Feed budgets

The fodder budgeting function in PastureBase Ireland has proven to be a most useful application to help farmers complete their fodder budgets.

It handles the calculations for feed supply and herd demand based on stock numbers and feed stock measurements provided by the client. Budget information is stored and can be revisited over time.

Michael O'Leary, PBI development co-ordinator, says the fodder budgeting application is growing in usage.

"Silage makes up about a quarter to one-third of total annual feed on most livestock farms, so it is vital to plan ahead.

"The fodder budget tool is worth a look, even if you are not currently measuring grass.

"There is plenty of help available from your advisor or the PastureBase helpline, so the advice is to gather your information and let the system do the sums for you," he said.



James Dunne, Teagasc dairy advisor, Ballyhaise, discusses fodder supplies with Gene.

Gene O'Rourke's yard in Laragh is packed full of this year's bales. Now in his third year milking, the young Cavan man has made good provision for feeding through the winter and out into next spring.

"We are heavily stocked at 3.8 cows per ha here at home," he explains, "So we must keep enough of the right quality feed on hand. It will all be needed."

When he converted from suckling and finishing cattle a few years back, Gene felt it necessary to push the grazing stocking rate to capacity and secure extra feed from external land, a common practice in the region.

"From the start, I needed to build enough scale to make this a viable unit," he says. 'I wanted to get as much grazed grass into cows as possible, but also make sure I wasn't going to be caught for feed in winter. So even though grazing stocking rate is high, my target was to bring whole farm rate to about 2.3 overall'.

An opportunity was taken to lease a block of good-quality land about 4km away from the yard, and this has made the numbers work in terms of feed security and overall stocking rate.

There is a good plan in place for this block. Grass cover is built on silage area in late summer and then grazed tight by young stock into early winter to clean off the swards.

Slurry (3,000g/ac) is applied with an umbilical system in February to establish a good base of potassium and phosphorus for the first-cut silage crop. This is topped up with urea as a Nitrogen source in March.

Soil is tested every second year and areas that have declined in soil index will get extra autumn slurry, or 0:7:30, to meet targets.

Gene makes all his own silage as bales. He employs a split first-cut, with early crop silage taken around May 15 and the remainder in late May. The early bales are used to feed the fresh cows in spring – these are generally baled dry at 75+ DMD.

The later first-cut bales are usually a bit lower DMD (70-72) and are fed in autumn when cows are stale. The split first-cut also has the advantage of having after-grass available for grazing young stock in stages.

"We try to make good first-cut silage to fill the gaps for the milking cows," he says. "I used to rely on surplus bales from paddocks, but the amount of surplus taken was too small. Anyway, most of these surplus bales don't tend to be great quality."

A bulky, lower DMD second-cut is taken in July to feed dry cows. Some area may be taken for third-cut, depending on the year – currently about 15% of the area is taken out for reseeding with an Abergain/Aberchoice plus clover sward mix.

Good management of the outside block has helped Gene to be more feed secure – based on his current feed budget, he is running a 12% silage surplus for the year. His long-term plan is to build silage pits to facilitate better long-term feed storage and reduce labour.

"Making all your own bales gives flexibility, but it's time-consuming in summer," he notes.

"The goal would be to pit the main first and second-cuts and use bales for the early stuff and surpluses. But it has been a case of crawl before you walk until now and getting the farm growing grass – no point in building big pits and having nothing to put into them."