

Seeing is believing

This Wexford farmer saw for himself the benefits of using PastureBase Ireland

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Seamus Sweeney is milking 110 dairy cows on a 36ha milking platform near Boolavogue, Ferns, Co Wexford. Last year, Seamus agreed to become the host farmer for the Wexford North Grass10 Course which met nine times on his farm in 2019. The course is co-facilitated by Martin Doyle, Teagasc adviser in Enniscorthy and myself, John Douglas, Grass10.

"While I was okay at estimating grass covers, I wanted to get more from grass," says Seamus. "I had seen other farmers getting good performance and asked myself why couldn't I do it?"

Seamus started measuring grass for the first time in 2019 through PastureBase Ireland and quickly learnt to use the weekly PastureBase reports to take the guesswork out of managing grass.

Last year, Seamus followed the cover/LU grazing targets (160-180kgDM/LU) from April onwards and removed surplus grass by making high-quality silage bales. Seamus says: "Every time the advice was given to take out a paddock it worked." By 1 July last year, Seamus had 300 bales of silage taken from the milking platform and cows were grazing the correct grass covers (1,400kgDM/ha) and milking better at grass.

"My theory around autumn grazing had always been to keep grazing the cows as they needed the grass until it was all gone," adds Seamus. "The ground would only get too wet and I wouldn't be able to graze it anyway. I usually struggled to stay out until 1 November."

As a result of being involved with the Grass10 course, Seamus said he

"Deliberately made the effort last year to build grass for the autumn." This would allow him to eat into this bank of grass and continue grazing for longer.

Last year, Seamus started closing up the farm in rotation from 6 October but still managed to keep cows out grazing until 15 November. This was an additional fortnight of grass in the diet even during challenging weather conditions.

Teagasc research shows that each additional day at grass in the autumn is worth €2/cow. When you do the calculation on Seamus's 110 cows, this equates to €3,300 in profit for the additional fortnight at grass. This profitability arises from the extra milk production from grass and cost savings from feed and machinery.

"It does reduce the workload around the yard a lot and with two weeks less slurry in the tanks, it eases the pressure to get slurry spread in the spring time," says Seamus.

Seamus starts calving around 20 January and tries to get cows out to grass as soon as they calve. "I was afraid that by grazing that late I wouldn't have grass available for the spring. But I found the real benefit came in the spring as I never ran tight on grass," he says. His average farm cover (AFC) on 1 February was 865kgDM/ha and he missed only seven days grazing during the first rotation this year due to difficult grazing conditions. This is important as each day at grass in the spring is worth €2.70/cow/day or nearly €300/day for Seamus's 110 cows.

"It has been a real eye-opener for me, seeing that it is possible to graze later and still have good grass supply on the farm in the spring. I am very happy with how it worked and will definitely be doing the same again this year," Seamus concludes.



John Douglas, Seamus Sweeney and his Teagasc advisor Martin Doyle.

How did Seamus do it?

1 Complete an autumn grass budget. PastureBase Ireland allows farmers to budget grass for spring and autumn, helping to grow more grass and keep grass in the diet for longer. The autumn budget should begin around 5 August and finish on 1 December. For each week you enter the area available for grazing, the number of cows and the amount of grass, meal and silage being fed (in KgDM). This generates the weekly demand on the farm.

Be sure to estimate and enter when silage or reseeded paddocks will be available. PastureBase uses past growth rates for your region to estimate the autumn grass growth. By setting demand against growth, the AFC can be increased or decreased. It is important to never run AFC below 500kgDM/ha and target a closing AFC 600-700kgDM/ha on 1 December. This ensures grass supply for the spring. The autumn grazing targets are summarised in Table 1.

2 Walk the farm weekly. A grazing budget is a plan which must be monitored to make sure the end goal is achieved. Continuing to complete farm covers on PastureBase Ireland is the best way. This allows you to compare the estimated growth figures



Table 1: Influence of seed rates on the weight of seed to be sown

Stocking rate Date	2.5 LU/ha		3.0 LU/ha		3.5LU/ha		Rotation Length for all SR. (Days)
	AFC (KgDM/ha)	Cover/LU (KgDM/LU)	AFC (KgDM/ha)	Cover/LU (KgDM/LU)	AFC (KgDM/ha)	Cover/LU (KgDM/LU)	
Early Aug	500	200	540	180	600	170	20
Mid Aug	600	240	750	250	770	220	25
Early Sept	750	300	990	330	980	280	30
Mid Sept	1100*	450	1100*	370	1200*	340	35
Early Oct (start of closing)	1000	400	1150	380	1175	335	40-50
1st Nov	60% of Farm Closed		65% of Farm Closed		70% of Farm Closed		
Closing Farm Cover December 1st	550-600kgDM/ha		600-650kgDM/ha		650-700kgDM/ha		

used in the budget with actual growth on the farm. This is important as it will affect AFC. Remember the AFC is the level of grass on the farm and grass grows grass so building AFC early is critical.

3 Stay on track. Walking the farm lets you see where the AFC should be and where it actually is. To stay on target, decisions need to be made to increase or decrease demand on the farm. Demand is affected by area available for grazing, number of cows and the amount of supplement fed.

For example, Seamus was behind target on 10 October and while he would usually have said he had plenty of grass, looking at the budget he knew he was behind. Seamus was already feeding 3kg meal so decided to supplement 6kgDM of silage per

cow, feeding three bales of silage for 110 cows. Seamus used the high-quality silage bales he had cut off the platform earlier in the year to fill this gap. This made sure he was on target to graze until mid-November.

4 Fertiliser. Use fertiliser wisely by applying early. Fertiliser spread in August will give a response of 27:1. Spreading the same amount in September only gives a response of 19:1. Applying 30kg N/ha (24u N/ac) in August will give an extra 240kgDM/ha at a stocking rate of 3LU/ha. This is worth five days grazing.

5 Close up the farm properly. Use the autumn rotation plan to close the farm up in rotation. The target is to graze and close 60% of the farm by 1 November and have the remainder closed by 1 December. An autumn

rotation planner can be completed on PastureBase Ireland and this syncs with the grass budget.

6 Stop grazing on time. Walking the farm weekly allowed Seamus to stop grazing at the right time to ensure enough grass on the farm for spring. His AFC on 15 November was 550kgDM/ha and Seamus decided to house the cows to be at 600-650kgDM/ha by 1 December. Continuing to graze past this point would mean poor grass supply in the spring. The target closing AFC will depend on stocking rate and is shown in Table 1.

Leaving the final words with Seamus: "Two things stood to me from hosting the Grass10 course; taking out surplus bales and using them to build and stretch grass in the autumn."