

Grassland Management- Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance

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We are just half way through the calendar year and to say the least 2020 has been eventful. The prolonged dry period has taken its toll on first cut silage and has reduced the quantity of grass grown on farms. It is important to look to good grassland management to fill any winter fodder deficit and maintain quality grass going into the second half of the year.

Assessing the required forage can be simply done using the table below to estimate what your animals will eat over the winter period. If in doubt contact your local Teagasc Adviser to give you a hand.

Table 1:

	A	B	C	
<i>Animal Type</i>	No. of Stock to be kept over Winter	Number of Months *(Include a 4-6 week reserve)	Pit Silage Needed tones / animal / month	Total tones of Silage Needed Multiply (AxBxC)
Dairy cows			1.6	
Suckler cows			1.4	
0-1 year old			0.7	
1-2 year old			1.3	
2+ year old			1.3	
Ewes			0.15	
Total tonnes needed			D	
Total bales needed (tonnes multiplied by 1.25)			E	

Finding out what is needed on the farm is the easy part, getting a plan in place to correct the deficit is not done without its difficulties. Looking at second cut silage, a few factors must be considered when applying 2nd cut fertilizer.

1. If rain is forecast and slurry is available spread slurry
2. **Do not** apply slurry if there is no rain coming as you will get a crust
3. If no rain is forecast or there is no slurry available look at spreading a compound fertilizer
4. If no rain is forecast and the dry conditions of early June have persisted split the compound fertilizer application, this reduces the amount of fertilizer sitting on the ground if not washed in.

Table 2 gives guidelines on the quantity of fertilizer required for a second cut silage crop. It is recommended that in some areas where the ground is free draining that 10-15 units/acre of sulphur is spread. The easiest way to incorporate this is to apply similar products to those outlined below in table 2 with added sulphur. Sulphur is relatively low cost and adds about €5 to €10/Ton. As a guide the fresh weight of a bale is about 800kg, 6t/ac fresh grass = 7.5 bales to the acre.

Table 2:

2 nd Cut Grass Silage- N,P&K Requirements (Off-takes) ^{3,4} Based on Grass yield & fertilizer Programmes					
Grass Yield (ton DM/ha) ²	N kg/ha (units/acre)	P kg/Ha (units/ac)	K kg/Ha (units/ac)	Fertilizer Options ¹	
				No Slurry ¹	Cattle Slurry
2 ton Dm/ha (4t/ac Fresh grass) ⁵	50 (40 units/ac)	8 (6 units/ac)	50 (40 units/ac)	2 bags/ac 15-3-20	1500 gals/ac 1bag/ac CAN
3 ton Dm/ha (6t/ac Fresh grass) ⁵	75(60 units/ac)	12(10 units/ac)	75(60 units/ac)	3 bags/ac 15-3-20 0.75 bag/ac CAN	2000 gals/ac 2bag/ac CAN
4 ton Dm/ha (8t/ac Fresh grass) ⁵	100(80 units/ac)	16(13 units/ac)	100(80 units/ac)	4 bags/ac 15-3-20 0.75 bag/ac CAN	2500 gals/ac 1bag/ac CAN

¹ Protected urea can replace CAN as N source. ² Apply 4kg P & 25kg K per tonne of grass dry matter (DM).
³ N,P&K advice for crop off takes based on grass DM yield at harvest time. ⁴ Apply 0-7-30/16% super P or 50% K to build soil fertility levels on soils at P & K index 1&2. ⁵ Fresh grass @20%DM

Managing Grass during and after a prolonged dry period:

With rain forecast at the time of writing this article, I would be hopeful that an “effective” amount of rain has fallen and farmers are back worrying about surplus’s and not deficits. But forecasts can be wrong and farmers must be ready to act.

Pasturebase has a positive outlook on the coming week with growth looking to increase significantly. Farmers should be looking to get their second cut fertilizer out but most importantly a surge in growth in the coming weeks will mean a good grassland management routine will be key. As in 2018 after the drought there was a massive surge in growth, this led to paddocks heading out early and a reduced quality in the sward. A farm that is experiencing a lot of growth should be walked once or twice weekly and when the time comes runaway paddocks should be taken out as surplus bales.

If growth **does not** increase considerably and the dry spell continues its important decisions are made on farm to reduce the impact on the performance of the animals. Continue to spread nitrogen fertilizer as normal if growth is strong 50+Kg DM/Ha. If growth is poor 25-

50kg DM/Ha use a reduced rate of fertilizer application, 15 Kg N/Ha (12units/ac). As long as there is a green butt in the grass sward fertiliser should continue to be spread.

It's important in a dry period to hold your rotation at around 25 days. This allows the farm time to recover when growth is poor. Don't take out surplus paddocks, strip graze these to extend rotation. Silage can be fed on the grazing platform to slow down the rotation. Creep feeding calves can reduce the demand on the cow. Cull any passengers such as underperforming and empty cows. Cattle that are close to being finished could be drafted out and given meal to finish. Grazing silage ground might be a necessary evil to get your rotation length to 25 days but take stock of your fodder budget before you do this.

For a weekly update on best grassland management practices go to the Pasturebase website at <https://pasturebase.teagasc.ie> here you will find a link to the weekly Grass 10 newsletter and also see current and predicted growth rates for the country.