

Learning on the job

How the Grass10 group and PastureBase Ireland have helped this Donegal new entrant.



Joseph Dunphy
Teagasc Grass10 Programme



In 2020, Oisín Gallen made the decision with his parents Eamon and Ann to convert their farm from beef and sheep production to dairying. The farm is located in Ramelton, Co Donegal. This year, Oisín, and his fiancée Karen Johnston (pictured right) are milking 85 cows on their 28ha milking platform. There is also 8ha of outside ground for silage and grazing youngstock. Maiden heifers are contract reared.

Oisín agreed to become host of the newly formed Donegal Grass10 Group in early 2021. The group meets monthly on his farm. The group is co-facilitated by Conor Maguire, Teagasc dairy advisor in Donegal, and myself, Joseph Dunphy, Grass10. A special mention must go to local advisor Tommy Doherty, who helped to set up the group and gave Oisín considerable help in the conversion process.

“We first started discussing the idea of converting the farm to dairy in the autumn of 2017. I was running beef and sheep on the farm and I was milking part-time with a local dairy farmer,” says Oisín.

“I had completed my Green Certificate in Ballyhaise Agricultural College and went on to complete the Level 8 in Sustainable Agriculture from Dundalk Institute of Technology in 2015.

“The wheels finally started moving in spring 2018 with the purchase of our first group of 60 dairy heifer calves. We purchased 15 maiden heifers after that in 2019.”

“The conversion process was tough. I had to be a ‘jack of all trades’, from paperwork and business planning to being hands on with the building



Karen Johnston and Oisín Gallen.

work in the yard. During this time, I educated myself on the type of system we wanted to run, while reassuring myself and my family that it would be successful.

“From what I had learnt in college, on farm walks and at discussion groups, the key to a profitable system was simply calving the cows compactly in spring and utilising as much grass as possible over a long grazing season. So we decided to purchase high-EBI Holstein Friesian heifers.”

“In February 2020, we calved our first cow here on Glenleary farm and

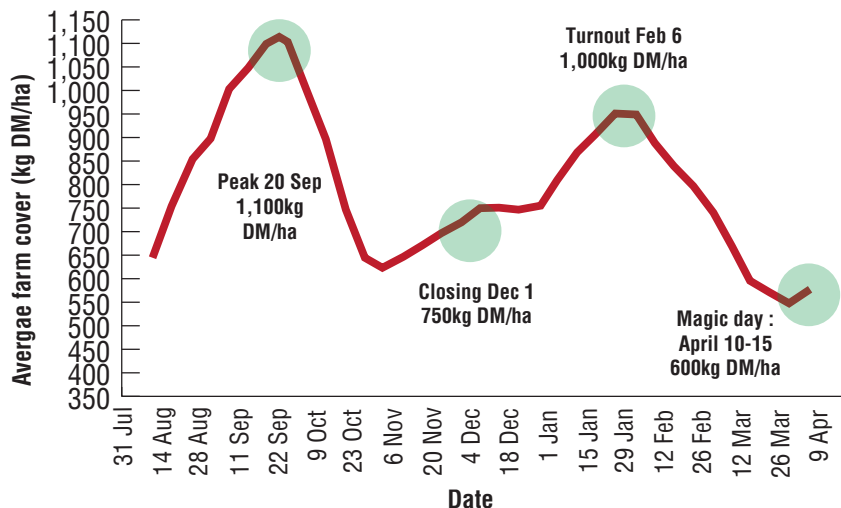
milking 74 heifers that year. We had a big issue with poor soil fertility on the farm, so we spent 2020 applying compound fertilisers and lime to improve the farm.

“We also had to improve the grazing infrastructure with a new water system and farm roadways.”

Teagasc research shows that every €1 invested in improved grazing infrastructure (i.e roadways, fencing, water, etc) will give you a return on investment of 58%.

This works on the basis that you will utilise an extra tonne of grass DM/

Feed budgeting - achieving target covers.



ha, which is worth €250 per ha/year, based on this year's input prices.

"The first grazing season was difficult. I had an idea of the ideal grazing covers (1,400kg DM/ha), but this was hit and miss. It wasn't until late 2020 that I was introduced to PastureBase, and I began to get it right - I have not looked back since.

"At the start, it took time to understand the different grass measurement terms such as average farm cover (AFC), cover/livestock unit, and growth vs demand.

"However, with practice and help from the Grass10 group, I believe I have got a good handle on how to use PastureBase Ireland for my benefit."

How does PastureBase Ireland and the Grass10 group help with Oisín's grassland management and profitability?

•Real time information to make grassland management decisions on his farm

"I feel that every time I walk my farm and enter data into PastureBase that I am building information and learning more about the capabilities of my farm. I have walked my farm and recorded grass covers 36 times in 2021 and 45 so far in 2022.

"It is now a staple of my weekly routine and if I do not have it completed, I miss it! The key information I am looking for when completing my weekly walk are the overall AFC figures, cover/LU, growth vs demand, and rotation-length back. I use the predicted wedge to see where I will be in seven days' time with different growth rates."

•Comparing yearly data to map progress and identify areas for improvement

"I now have two years data built up on PastureBase and I can already

see areas where the farm has improved. The farm grew over 13t DM/ha in 2021. I can see the poorest five paddocks and these are earmarked for reseeding or investigating a soil fertility issue. The Grass10 target of 10 events per paddock per year are in the back of my mind, and for 2022, I expect to finish between eight to nine events per paddock."

•Comparing information with like-minded farmers within Donegal and around the country

"The Grass10 group has really driven me to do a better job, as I try and implement the advice that the group has discussed at the previous monthly meeting. When everyone has their PastureBase walk up-to-date, it's a great discussion tool for groups.

"We all have the same challenges when it comes weather and ground conditions, and it is great to see to see how everyone else is managing during a particular time.

"It is also great to be able to discuss cover/cow and growth rates with farmers back at home in Cavan and other locations throughout the country."

•Managing autumn grazing for a successful and profitable spring 2023

The focus of autumn grazing management is to increase the number of days at grass and animal performance, but also to set the farm up during the final rotation to grow grass over winter and provide grass the following spring.

Generally, rotation length should be extended from 10 August.



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Oisín with Teagasc dairy advisor Conor Maguire.



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The focus of this period is to gradually build pre-grazing covers, targeting covers of 2,000kg to 2,200kg DM/ha in mid-September.

“Having grass for next spring is dictated by what happens on the farm throughout October and November especially.

“My six week calving rate is over 80%, so it is vital that I manage the grass correctly and prioritise next spring, where every day at grass will be worth about €4 per cow per day according to Teagasc research,” says Oisín.

“I aim to close the farm in rotation throughout October, ending up with an AFC of 750kg DM/ha on 1 December. It is never going to go exactly to planned, as weather can come against us here at times in Donegal.

“However, hope is not a strategy and it is vital to have a plan to have grass on the farm in spring 2023.”

Three areas of grassland focus for 2023

• Clover incorporation

“In order to reduce the N input on my

farm and benefit from higher quality herbage, I intend to significantly increase the amount of clover present in the swards on my farm,” says Oisín.

“I reseeded one paddock with 2kg white clover and 1kg red clover in June 2022. I am very impressed with the herbage grown on that paddock, considering it has received 1,500 gallons per acre of dairy washings and half a bag of 0-0-50 in early September.

“It has received no chemical N since the 10-10-20 at reseeded. The key to clover will be soil fertility, so I intend to soil sample the whole platform this winter.”

• Pre-grazing yield

“In 2021, my pre-grazing yield during the summer months was extremely high at 2,000kg DM/ha. This was much better in 2022 at 1,500kg DM/ha, however I intend to lower this again back between 1,300-14,00kg DM/ha to maximise the milk produced from grazed grass.

“Lower pre-grazing yields will help to encourage clover development,

with more light getting to the base of the sward. Key to this is walking the farm six times per month during the main grazing season.”

• Autumn grazing targets

“Over the last number of years, as the grazing infrastructure has improved, I am more comfortable grazing higher grass covers on the farm in the autumn. To get a long grazing season and have grass on the farm for the spring, it is vital to build grass during August.

“In hindsight, I have often had to supplement with silage later in September, as I did not extend out the rotation length early enough in August. It’s vital to be out at a 30 day rotation by early September.”



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