

Teagasc Notes for week ended Friday August 16th 2019

Making the most of Grass on Your Farm

Grass is the cheapest feed available to farmers at 7 cent per kg of dry matter (DM), when a charge for the land is included. Coming into the autumn, it is critical to keep grass in the diet to keep feed costs down. Mid-August (10th to 15th) is start of the grass year and this is the time where the rotation length is extended to build grass toward a peak at the end of September. The grass grown in this period is the grass that will feed the stock out until the end of November and early December in some cases.

Step 1: Building Grass

The grass growth rate in the autumn falls off as soil temperatures reduce from the summer highs. To build grass this autumn, take advantage of the good growth in August and September. In addition to this, the stocking rate must be reduced to lessen the demand for grass. In other words, the daily demand for grass must be less than the daily grass growth rate. In most cases, this is done by bringing silage ground into the rotation. In highly stocked farms or where silage ground is too far away, the daily demand can be reduced by increasing meal feeding or reducing the number of stock grazing on the available land. On dairy farms this could involve drying off poor performing cows, high cell count cows etc.

Walk the farm on a weekly basis to assess progress each week. Be flexible and decisive to meet the targets. The rule of thumb is to have an average farm cover of roughly 1,000 kg DM/ha and a cover/cow of 300-330 on the grazing area available by the 1st of October.

Step 2: Closing Paddocks;

Make a definite plan to close paddocks from the middle of October. On highly stocked farms, the closing date may be a week earlier than this and on lower stocked farms a week later. Remember, the grass grown from mid-October is the grass that you will be grazing next spring from turnout in early to mid-February. If weather conditions are good in late October and November, the temptation is always to graze again. But keep in mind that the growth rate is falling and if you graze these closed paddocks in the autumn, there will not be enough grass on them for early turnout in the spring. Spring grass is high in digestibility and dry matter and is far superior to silage for dairy cows or cattle. The aim should be to save it for the spring when it is more valuable.

Measuring Grass

Walking the farm on a weekly basis, and measuring how much grass is on the farm is much more accurate in terms of building and utilising grass this autumn and into next spring. The big challenge for most farmers is to actually walk the farm on a weekly basis. Walking the farm weekly also has significant personal health benefits for the farm operator and other family members involved, while also keeping you in tune with what's happening out around the farm. Once the covers on each paddock are established, they can be inputted into PastureBase or other software to work out a detailed autumn budget where the closing dates can be decided much more accurately. Your local Teagasc advisor can help you to learn to measure grass either individually or through a discussion group.

Discussion Groups

Research has proven that farmers in discussion groups make more money than farmers who are not, given the higher rate of technology adaptation. With the completion of the Knowledge Transfer (KT) scheme it is critical for farmers in all enterprises to remain part of a discussion group. Discussion groups provide an informal setting on a monthly basis for farmers to:

- share ideas
- solve problems
- acquire technical expertise
- socialise
- opportunity to see and experience other farms
- validate information with group members and their adviser.

Teagasc will maintain a discussion group meeting programme as normal throughout the autumn.

