

Good weather for growing and grazing

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Our measuring farmers have grown 24kg DM/ha/day since last week, a 60% increase on the week before. Higher temperatures and more sunlight have brought ideal conditions for growing and more importantly eating grass. The vast majority of farmers have managed to get some class of stock to grass this week as ground conditions improved.

Those on the wettest ground have been able to take some baby steps with lighter stock and/or their driest areas. While these conditions look set to continue for the coming days, there is moisture forecast in western areas on Friday and Saturday.

Thoughts should be turning to silage ground now. We have two weeks to graze it as well as we can. Research shows that grazing high covers off silage ground in the spring and getting it harvested by the end of May can improve digestibility (DMD) by four units. This equates to roughly 1kg less

meal that needs to be fed each day to the animals wintering on this silage.

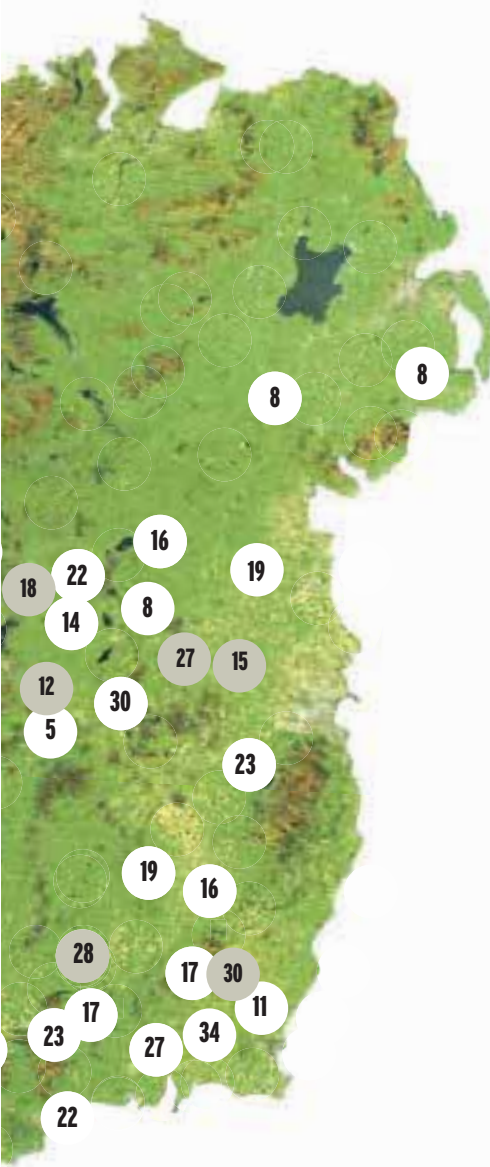
While silage yield will be reduced by 15%, there is no reduction in overall farm forage production for the year – it is going into them as grass and not silage. To hit this date, we need to be going with around 2,000 gallons of slurry and 80+ units of nitrogen after close-up.

Some farmers are reporting that grass is getting away from them already. Having got slurry and fertiliser out in January, weather meant their hands were tied in terms of grazing

subsequently. There are plenty of covers north of 2,000kg DM/ha (12cm) out there. Not clearing these out now will have knock-on quality effects in subsequent rotations.

Ideally, it's cows that should be hitting these. If there are younger stock going in, don't try to force them to graze out completely. It may be feasible to follow beef stock with cows and calves as a once-off to get things cleaned up, though this practice shouldn't become a routine thing.

Cull cow groups would be ideal candidates for eating these away.



John Heslin
Derrypatrick Herd, Meath

Farm cover: 1,300kg DM/ha
Growth: 15kg DM/ha

Heifer and steer yearlings were turned out to grass last Friday (10 March). Yearlings were sent to some of the driest paddocks on the farm, which contained covers of 1,100kg DM/ha. The decision was made to provide 24-hour allocation of our medium grass covers in order to maximise utilisation and minimise damage while animals adjust to the dietary and housing change. Thankfully, weather was favourable and no damage was done to the first paddocks grazed.

Twenty-four cows and calves were turned out to grass on Tuesday of this week. Grazing in two groups of 12. Cows and calves were turned to paddocks with both adequate shelter to ensure calves adjust to the outdoor environment and suitable ground conditions to limit soil damage. There has been a noticeable improvement in ground conditions between yearling and cow turnout dates, that should ensure ground damage is minimised and therefore set the farm up to maximise grass growth for the grazing season of 2017.



John O'Connor
Kildalton College

Farm cover: 712kg DM/ha
Growth: 30kg DM/ha

We turned 14 more cows out to grass on Monday with their calves – there are now 32 out and 49 of the 60 cows have calved. While many farms will have a huge bank of grass built up that might get difficult in the coming days, we've had ewes out since early-February keeping things in check and this has us in a great position to utilise lots of grass and get things moving. We are going with our second urea application (0.75 bags/acre) this week and I am expecting a good response given the growth rates.

After a difficult start to calving, things have improved. We are 50:50 AI/natural service here. Our five-star maternal cows were served with AI sires like SI2152 to breed replacements. Other mature cows got KJB and heifers got EBY and ZAG. Our Charolais stock bull, by LGL, went in on clean-up duty then.

Bullocks and ewes are currently grazing silage ground, which we plan to close on 1 April. After that, it'll get 100 units of nitrogen via CAN (3 bags) and slurry.



Matthew Murphy
Newford Herd, Co Galway

Farm cover: 1,272kg DM/ha
Growth: 38kg DM/ha

The farm cover here is high but there are no massive individual covers and our fresh calves are out and mowing through the heaviest. In six weeks, we've calved 82 cows and have 85 live calves – it feels like it's been a lot longer. There are 24 left and we should finish by mid-April.

With the good weather this week we were able to let out 72 cows and calves which was a great release for us – space was getting tight.

Yearlings will all be out by Thursday (today). There's a slight delay with these as we have to draw them some of the way. Some of them are currently grazing out silage ground. This will be closed up in the first week of April and get 2,000 gallons of slurry and three bags of CAN to the acre.

The whole farm received a half-bag of urea three weeks ago and we'll follow grazings with the same again. It's been a great week for grazing, but I'm conscious that there is 16mm of rain forecast here for Saturday.



Tommie Holmes
Ballina, Co Mayo

Farm cover: 1,281kg DM/ha
Growth: 32kg DM/ha

As one of the new BETTER beef farmers, I am putting a lot of effort into my grassland this year. My programme adviser John Greaney analysed my soil tests from the last back end and has instructed me as to where I should be going with what fertilisers so as to optimise my soil lime (pH), P and K levels.

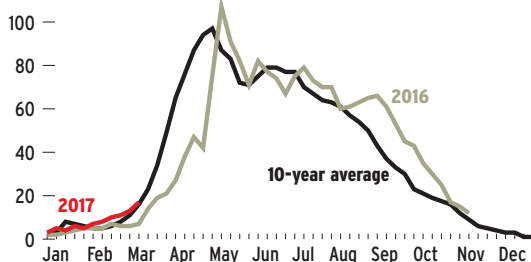
It's limestone land here and I've been able to on/off graze 10 weanling bulls in the last few weeks when things were wet. They got used to the routine after a while and got silage and a tiny amount of meal during the night, to keep them settled if anything.

At present, the bulls are not going into the heaviest covers – these are being left for cows and calves who will achieve better clean-outs.

In terms of silage ground, my first cut field is very wet so I grazed it tight in November, will fertilise it this week and take cuts on 10 May and then again in June. I'm going to reseed it this year.

10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day



BETTER farm
Beef Programme





Blazing a trail with bull beef



In the last week of profiles, Ciarán Lenehan introduces the BETTER farm bull beef producers

Our BETTER farm Beef Challenge bull producers group encompasses both those slaughtering bulls on the QPS grid under 16 months of age and those producing older bulls – usually getting a partial second season at grass.

Bull beef can drive a farm's output in two ways. Research has shown that a bull will grow around 16% faster than a steer under similar conditions. Their increased tendency to grow lean muscle leads to a higher rate of beef output per unit of feed going in – be it grass or concentrates.

The second way that a bull boosts a farm's output is by freeing up farm resources. While steer systems typically require two full seasons at grass and two winters, bulls require either one or one-and-a-half grazing seasons and almost never need a second winter (apart from animals born shortly before or during the wintering period). Bulls will reach slaughter targets in a fraction of the time that a steer takes. This allows for more room to push cow, or other drystock numbers and achieves more output per hectare.

Leaner

However, research also shows that bulls will be around 20% leaner than steers when fed similarly. In order to achieve adequate carcase fatness specifications, bulls must be intensively fed with concentrates prior to slaughter and this makes the system an expensive one. The chart shows how our BETTER farm systems rank in terms of profitability, output and the main input bills. Given that under-16 month bulls see limited or no grass post-weaning, this system's feed bill is highest at €531/ha, but so are its profits.

The strength of the under 16-month bull system is the combination of a bull's ability to grow and the premium beef price achieved. The 20 month bull is relying solely on the former here, though a period of cheap grass-based weight gain post-weaning is the key to its success. As it is not considered prime beef, constant communication between processor and producer is a necessity in this system – it is a niche.

Fixed costs ●
€/hr labour ●
Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Split winter and spring
Farm system	Suckler to under 20-month bull
Farm size	58.4ha
2016 gross margin	€974/ha
Land type	Heavy drumlin

Wesley Browne, Dunraymond, Co Monaghan

Wesley is running 80 cows on heavy drumlin land outside Monaghan town. Around 8ha of the most challenging land was planted in spring 2016. Wesley is a member of the Monaghan Quality Group. All of the male progeny are slaughtered under-16 months. Replacement heifers are home-bred, with suitable surplus heifers sold for breeding and any overly-terminal heifers are slaughtered. Most of Wesley's breeding herd are four- or five-star maternal animals.

Fixed costs ●
€/hr labour ●
Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler to steer
Farm size	113.5ha
2016 gross margin	€750/ha
Land type	Free-draining loam

John Dunne, Portarlinton, Co Offaly

John Dunne is a full-time suckler-to-beef farmer in Portarlinton, Co Offaly. He is married to Eileen and they have four children. He runs a herd of 100 suckler cows operating out of two farmyards. He brings the majority of his progeny to beef. The soil is good-quality, dry and sandy with good grass-growing potential. Though bull beef has been tried in recent years, John has decided to focus on steer beef to utilise more grass on the sizeable farm.

Fixed costs ●
€/hr labour ●
Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Summer
Farm system	Suckler to under 20-month bull
Farm size	60.1ha
2016 gross margin	€859/ha
Land type	Variable

Maurice Hearne, Dunmore East, Co Waterford

Maurice is farming near the coast in Dunmore East, Co Waterford. The farm comprises 50ha of grassland, 23ha of arable and 25ha of mixed grazing ground. Maurice operates a suckler-to-beef system, with all males finished as bulls at 16-18 months and heifers at 20-22 months. A flock of 160 crossbred ewes are lambed down in mid-season. Maurice hopes to calve 90 cows in 2017. He uses both stock bulls and AI.

Fixed costs ●
€/hr labour ●
Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Summer (Apr-Jun)
Farm system	Suckler to under 16-month bull
Farm size	44ha
2016 gross margin	€1,045/ha
Land type	Heavy clay

Joe Healy, Athboy, Co Meath

John and Joe Healy are a father and son who farm outside Athboy, Co Meath. Joe has a young family and works full-time off-farm. Since getting out of dairying 10 years ago, they have concentrated on retaining milk within the herd and driving quality through the use of AI, all of which is done by Joe. The farm is 100% grass and the land is moderate-quality for Meath. Joe hopes to improve profit through growing and utilising more grass on the farm and increasing their stocking rate.



WATCH ONLINE

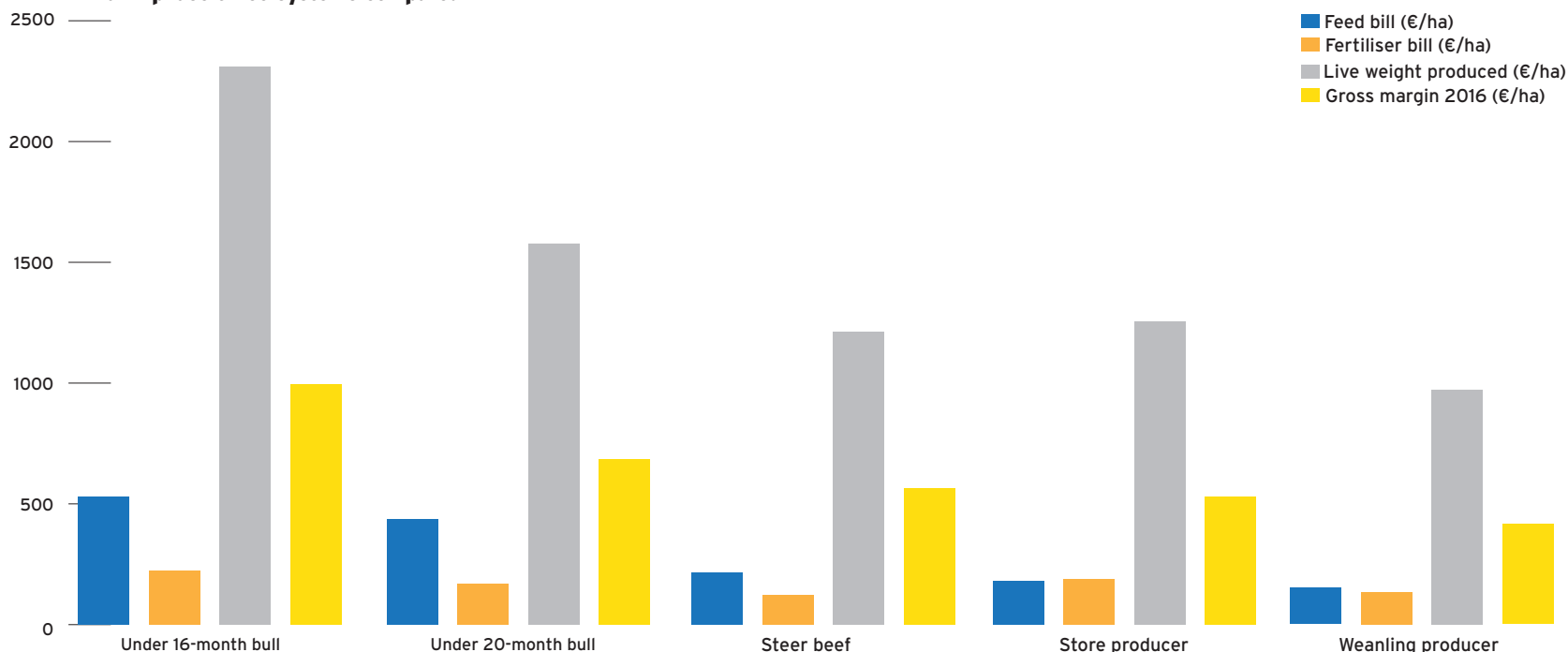
watch the video on www.farmersjournal.tv



NEXT WEEK

We analyse the soil test results from the 27 new BETTER farms

BETTER farm phase three systems compared

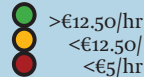


Guide to figures

Fixed costs:



€/hr worked:
(as proportion
of net profit)



Cashflow:
(consecutive
months without)



Fixed costs ●
€/hr labour ●
Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Split spring and autumn
Farm system	Suckler to under 20-month bull
Farm size	18ha
2016 gross margin	€430/ha
Land type	Variable

Fixed costs ●
€/hr labour ●
Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Winter/spring (Dec-Jan)
Farm system	Suckler to under 20-month bull
Farm size	23.9ha
2016 gross margin	€701/ha
Land type	Relatively dry

Fixed costs ●
€/hr labour ●
Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Split spring and autumn
Farm system	Suckler to under 16-month bull
Farm size	42ha
2016 gross margin	€967/ha
Land type	Free-draining

Tommie Holmes, Ballina, Co Mayo

Tommie Holmes is farming 18ha in Tullysleva, outside Ballina, Co Mayo. The land type is good and free draining - former potato land. The farm operates a suckler-to-beef system with bulls finished at 16-20 months. Additional weanlings are purchased in the autumn at the local mart. Breed type is mainly Angus. There is a high reliance on grazed grass on the farm, with a paddock grazing system in place. Non-performing paddocks are reseeded and grass is measured weekly. The stocking rate at present on the farm is 1.9 LU/ha.

John McSweeney, Lissarda, Co Cork

John McSweeney is married to Trish and they have two young children. They are farming 24ha of predominantly dry, well-drained grassland in Co Cork. Both John and Trish are working off-farm. There is a suckler herd of 20 cows at present and progeny are sold as beef with bulls sold under-16 months and heifers sold under-17 months. In 2016, 51 Friesian bull calves were bought, reared and sold again as weanlings.

Martin O'Hare, Dundalk, Co Louth

Martin is farming in a partnership with his mother Sheila in Dundalk, Co Louth, on three free-draining blocks of land. He is married to Eilish. The farm comprises of 42ha grass and 18ha of tillage. He presently has 70 suckler cows and brings most of the progeny to beef. Males are all finished as bulls under 16-months. Martin's aim for the programme is to become as efficient as he can and in doing so remain a viable full-time farmer into the future.