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Investment in grass reaping rewards

Glen McDermott's plans for expansion have been made possible by a strong focus on grass and grazing management, writes **Matthew Halpin**

For someone struggling to believe in the importance of grass on a farm, a trip to Glen McDermott's farm outside Castlebaldwin in Sligo would go a long way in changing their minds. Glen is farming 53ha of mostly heavy land with the help of his son Dillon and support of wife Brenda and daughter Ellie. He also works off-farm. The land is split into two blocks: 32ha and a yard lie approximately three miles away, while a 21ha home block surrounds his house and main yard. Recently, Glen has also agreed on the lease of an additional 16ha next door to his home block.

On joining the programme, the farm was running 40 suckler cows in a 50:50 split spring and autumn calving herd. Progeny were also being sold as weanlings. In terms of grassland, the farm was not fulfilling its potential.

Moving year

To anyone that follows golf, the Saturday of all major tournaments is known as "moving day" because it is the day where competitors try to set themselves up for the final push for glory on Sunday. Traditionally, year two of the BETTER farm programme could be known as "moving year" because it is the year in which the much talked about plans come to life and the push to meet the ambitious programme targets begin to take shape. Last week we saw how Tom Bolger was implementing changes to his system. This week, Glen McDermott is no different.

After a year and a half, the farm has undergone a significant transformation. The decision was made to join-up the spring and autumn calvers and the farm is currently half way through this transition.

The autumn calvers were let slip around into the spring calving herd and at present there are 42 cows due to begin calving in early January. The reason for this change was based on a management decision – multiple groups of stock in a 40 cow herd didn't make sense. As well as this, the majority of progeny are now being taken to beef. Bulls are being sold under 16-months while a large proportion of heifers are also being slaughtered, with only a few being kept as replacements, picked on an individual basis. The remaining replacements required are usually purchased in local marts. This autumn, Glen is planning to purchase in excess of 30 yearling heifers as replacements to go for breeding next spring, with the ultimate aim of increasing his cow herd to over 60.

Unleashing the potential of grass

The BETTER Farm beef challenge has set a number of mandatory and optional challenges to each programme participant. Of the three mandatory challenges, grassland management is one of those. The message is clear – "setting targets is one thing, realising them is another; and without good grassland management the latter wouldn't be possible."

Quite frankly, none of the changes on Glen's farm would be possible but for the huge emphasis that has been placed on proper grazing infrastructure and management. Before going any further, it would be fair to say that this reasonably wet farm is benefiting from the exceptionally dry summer, however, it still did receive a burning during the drought. After receiving rain last week, the farm most certainly would not have been

Land at the bottom of the hill was drained and reseeded in May this year.

*Guide to traffic lights

Fixed costs:

- <€350/ha
- <€550/ha
- >€550/ha

€/hr worked:

- (as prop of net profit)
- >€12.50/hr
 - <€12.50/
 - <€5/hr

Cashflow:

(consecutive months without sales- inc. sheep)

- <5
- <7
- >7

looking as well as it was when we visited, had good management not been one of the key points.

The key has been improving soil fertility with the help of BETTER farm programme advisor John Greaney and local B&T advisor Peter Mullan. According to Glen, the soil "would have had very poor fertility," however, a plan was put in place to rectify this, which included the application of large amounts of lime, the constant spreading of P and K and even the importation of pig slurry. The idea of spreading fertiliser only when ground is bare was quickly knocked on the head and now fertiliser is targeted during good growing periods to maximise the grass grown. To keep topping up soil P and K, 18:6:12 is the preferred choice of fertiliser.

Reclaiming and improving large parts of ground that were under-producing has been another key component of maximising his land's potential. Some parts of the farm were dominated by rushes and this problem was corrected with MCPA and Forefront sprays. However, the single most important element to improving under-performing swards was reseeding. Glen was not shy about reseeding. When asked about the large investment required, Glen replied: "the quality and amount of grass I have now is a reward for the investment I feel." To put the cherry on top, stone on the farm was, despite being somewhat rough, used to make roadways on the farm, perfectly adequate for Glen's needs.

A real enthusiasm

As mentioned, Glen has also finalised the lease of 40 acres of land close by. The lease is for 12 years. Undeniably, the land is in marginal condition at the moment, with rushes dominating the majority of the area. With this in mind, the productiv-

Teagasc adviser comment

Glen has embraced the ethos of the programme since joining last year, focusing on the key drivers of profitability; grassland management, animal performance and stocking rate. On this farm lime was the catalyst and the quality of sward has improved immensely and he is now growing well above what he requires but this is welcome as he needs to replace diminished fodder reserves for next winter. Eager to up cow numbers, sourcing top quality heifers for breeding is an option he seems open to. The roadways while not a necessity will make life easier for AI and utilising grass in wet weather. Slowly but surely the pieces of the jigsaw are coming together for Glen

-JOHN GREANEY

ity of the land for Glen was questioned. However, it is hard not to be impressed by Glen's enthusiasm and ambition and one could say that the 'grassland bug' has really bitten him.

As we walked into the land, a track machine was already on day four of its task of cleaning the ditches and filling redundant drains. The plan is to reclaim and reseed almost two thirds of the land this year and the final portion in a few years' time. Given the length of the lease, Glen believes it is worth the investment: "The work on the land will allow me to cut a lot more silage and it will also give me the option of buying in extra stock. The owner of the land is also contributing to some of the investment in years four, five and six of the lease". Details of the reclamation job are outlined in Table 1.

Grass, and proper grassland management should be, just like on this farm, at the core of every farm plan – after all, it is the cheapest and one of the most effective feeds that we have available to us. For example, research has shown that every tonne of additional grass utilised on a beef farm, will add approximately €105/ha additional profit. Without doubt, it is hard to believe the difference that an enthusiasm for good grassland management can make – even on some of the most marginal land, and Glen is an example of this.



VIDEO ONLINE
watch the video on
farmersjournal.tv

Table 1: Reseeding and reclamation plan, commencing mid-July


Step	Description
Step 1	Clean ditches, drains and fill redundant drains
Step 2	Spray-off ground with roundup excel
Step 3	Top off dead material
Step 4	Apply lime at 2.5t/acre
Step 5	After one week, disc harrow ground
Step 6	Level land
Step 7	Sow seed (fertiliser spreader/seed box)
Step 8	Roll
Step 9	Apply 10:10:20 at 150kg/acre
Step 10	After six weeks, apply CAN at 50kg/acre
Step 11	Graze with weanling heifers before housing

Glen McDermott, Co Sligo

Fixed costs: ●

€/hr labour: ●

Cashflow: ●



Calving pattern	Spring calving
Farm system	Suckler to bull beef
Farm size	53ha
2017 gross margin	€297/ha
Land type	Variable