Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal
BETTER FARM BEEF CHALLENGE

Top 10 BETTER grass men revealed

As year one of BETTER farm phase three reaches its conclusion, **Ciarán Lenehan** reviews 2017 grass production

The 2017 grazing season is a distant memory for our BETTER beef farmers now. As 2018 looms, mornings are cold, sheds are brimming and grass silage is starter, main and dessert – it's very easy for these farmers to forget what the biggest determinant of their own success during the programme and beyond will be.

Grazed grass is the cornerstone of any successful Irish livestock system. Energy is the most limiting nutrient in cattle production and the energy in grazed grass is three times cheaper than that in good-quality grass silage and four times cheaper than a generic concentrate ration.

Feed represents 75% of the variable costs on a beef farm and by providing as much of this feed as possible in the form of grazed grass, our BETTER farmers will increase profit margins on their holdings.

Indeed, this phase of BETTER farm has a challenge aspect incorporated into it, which involves farmers completing challenges that will help their farm business. One of the mandatory challenges is the 2t grass growth challenge.

To drive performance from grassland, culminating in the production and utilisation of an extra 2t of grass dry matter per ha at the end of the three- to four-year period, relative to year one. Where possible, we want to use the extra production to extend the grazing season by two weeks in spring and two weeks in winter to reduce feed costs and drive cheap animal performance.

Principles

There are four principles that farmers must buy in to if this challenge is to be completed:

➲ **Soil fertility:** lime, potassium and phosphorus concentrations must be optimised in the soil. A soil fertility challenge has also been incorporated into the programme. While not mandatory, the participant farmers realise its importance and almost all have chosen to take part.

➲ **Infrastructure:** all of our participant farmers have established paddocking systems on their holdings. Some have taken the plunge straight away and installed permanent fencing in year one. Others used temporary fencing in 2017 to get a feel for what their most suitable fencing layout might be. We saw some excellent examples of cost-effective fencing in large open fields. The example of Martin O'Hare in Louth comes to mind. He split a 16-acre silage field into eight divisions, while still leaving the land contractor-friendly, for €850. This includes water troughs and installation.

➲ **Reseeding:** in general, newer pastures based on ryegrass cultivars and white clover will have a higher nutrient value and better yields than older permanent pastures. Many of the BETTER farmers have already begun to reseed, though some have chosen to wait until soil fertility is in a better state before doing so. Those reseeding now are doing so as they can afford to take land out of the system for periods now before stock numbers significantly ramp up later in the programme.

➲ **Grassland measurement:** the phrase "measure to manage" couldn't be more relevant here. When non-farmers ask why it's so important to measure grass, I use the banana example.

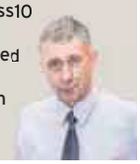
"Grass is like a banana. We need to be eating it when it's yellow, not too early when it's green or too late when it's brown."

Our BETTER farmers are using the Teagasc Pasturebase grassland management tool. They walk their farms weekly during the grazing season and use plate meters to measure the amount of grass in each paddock. The results are inputted to Pasturebase, which subsequently aids with management decisions. The system enables farmers to identify potential grass surpluses or deficits before they happen.

As many of the farms were running low stocking rates in 2017, the scenario during the summer months was generally one of surplus grass. Measuring grass gave our farmers the peace of mind to remove this surplus grass repeatedly. While many grew frustrated making bale after bale during the grazing season, they are certainly relieved to have done so now given the national fodder situation. In the coming years, our farmers will look to increase numbers on their grazing areas, with the Pasturebase system acting as their guide along the way.

The plate meter has become the most important piece of equipment on our BETTER farms

Tommy Holmes farm facts



- 18 fragmented hectares.
- Suckler bull beef producer.
- 2.9 LU/ha in 2017.
- 30 grassland measurements in 2017.
- Gley brown podzol soil.
- 19 paddocks on farm.
- 12t fertiliser spread in 2017.
- 60% of farm closed up by 24 October 2017.
- Hosted Teagasc Grass10 walk in autumn 2017.
- 80% of farm reseeded in last decade.
- 40t of lime spread in 2017.

> If our 27 farmers can pass the 2t grass challenge, they will have put an additional €300,500 of cumulative net profit into their pockets

Table 1 outlines the top 10 BETTER farmers from a grass production point of view in 2017. The average across all 27 programme farms was 7.9t of grass dry matter production per ha in 2017. It is estimated that the national average figure for grass produced per ha on drystock farms is between 5t and 7t, with a utilisation figure of around 60%.

Installing paddock systems and properly managing grass on our BETTER farms will have pushed utilisation closer to 80%.

For me, the top five farms are already at a level where the rest of the farmers should aspire to be. I know, however, that they will not rest on their laurels. All are planning to increase stocking rates and to do so they must focus on soil fertility and reseeding to produce more grass as well as measurement and infrastructure to drive utilisation.

Teagasc figures show that every extra tonne of grass dry matter grown on a drystock farm increases net profit per hectare by €105. If our 27 farmers can pass the 2t grass dry matter challenge, they will have put an additional €300,500 of cumulative net profit into their pockets.

Our top producer, Tommy Holmes, had bought into grassland management long before joining the BETTER farm beef programme. He had invested in permanent fencing, drinkers and small distances of roadway to set his farm up for hitting its grass potential.

Granted, it's much easier to do so on an 18ha farm versus a 74ha farm like that belonging to the Breens in Wexford, but it's all relative when it comes to the output that can be attained from these hectares.

Table 1: Top 10 grass-producing BETTER farmers 2017

Farmer	County	Hectares	Land type	Average 2017 production/ha (kg)
Thomas Holmes	Mayo	18	Variable	15,411
Kieran Noonan	Cork	43	Heavy	12,896
The Breens	Wexford	74	Heavy clay	11,273
John McSweeney	Cork	24	Relatively dry	10,599
Joe Healy	Meath	44	Heavy clay	10,141
Sean Hayes	Clare	64	Variable	8,663
Ken Gill	Offaly	95	Heavy clay	8,614
Shane Gleeson	Limerick	40	Mixed	8,549
Martin Downes	Westmeath	89	Mostly heavy	8,057
Robert Abbot	Longford	30	Variable	7,826
27-farm average				7,922