

Maximising grass growth on my farm

Ger Dineen, *Suckler to beef farmer, Kilnamartyra, Co. Cork*

Farm Background

I want to thank the Irish Grassland Association for inviting me to speak here today at the 2018 beef conference. I am a full time Suckler Farmer and a previous participant in the Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal BETTER farm beef programme. I am married to Gobnait and have four children, Muireann, Ciara, Danial and Ciaran. I farm 50 Ha just outside Macroom in West Cork. I have 12 Ha of forestry on some of the more marginal land and 32 adjusted Ha of grassland. I was part of the Better Farm beef program from 2012 to 2017. My farm is 2/3 dry ground and 1/3 heavy ground. I have 60 suckler cows and finish the male progeny under 16 months. I keep my own replacements and the surplus heifers are sold for breeding. A.I is carried out on all my cows, which I do myself, and keep around 20% for replacements. All cows and heifers are bred to maternal sires. I am using Simmental, Saler, Angus, Limousin and this year, Shorthorn. I am also using Fleckvieh Simmental to add more milk to my cows.

Tough 2018

First I have to start with the horrendous spring of 2018 and autumn of last year. It was really testing for me and my animals. When you cannot feed your animals you feel like a failure. The stress involved, the huge cost of buying silage and ration took a huge toll on myself. A lot of evenings I came in from the yard depressed and questioned our system. It really tested me mentally and physically. I think it is really important to get away from the farm sometimes. I am involved with the local GAA club, we train twice a week and have regular games at the weekend. We are a sports mad family, my boys play football and hurling and my girls are also into football and horse riding.

Grassland Farmer of the Year

I won Beef Grassland farmer in 2017, growing an average 14 tonne/DM per hectare in the previous year. My farm is good to grow grass when all the conditions are right. However the grass growing year of 2012 and spring of 2013 were awful, and the fall of 2017 and spring of 2018 were even worse. It taught me a lesson that I had to cut back my stocking rate from 2.5 to around 2.2 and match my stock to the grass I can grow.

When I started the Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal Better Farm beef programme I was growing an average of 7 tonne per hectare. By the end of the program I was growing an average of 14 tonne per hectare. It was like having an extra farm next to me and my stocking rate went from 1.4 to 2.4. All my soil samples were low for P and K at the start of 2012, now they are at index 3 for P and K and soil pH is around

6.7. I also soil sample every 3 years. I reseed around 10-15% of my farm every year. I measure my grass every week and download it to Pasture Base. On Pasture Base you can see the paddocks that are doing well and the ones that are performing poorly. Last year my paddocks ranged from 8-18 tonne per hectare.

Grassland Management on my farm

My farm has 32 paddocks of roughly 1 hectare each. The more paddocks you have the more control you have over grass. I also have road ways running to most paddocks and every year I am putting in more road ways. The paddocks that are growing only 8 tonne/DM per hectare are ok in Lime, P and K but it is cold peaty ground. The only way of improving this is drainage. I have started putting in drains every 30 feet apart. An excavator comes in with a 1 foot shoring bucket, we dig down one and a half feet and fill it nearly to the top with 2 inch stone. These shallow drains feed out to deep drains at the outside of the paddock. It is expensive to do but I see the paddocks going from 8 to 12 tonne per hectare. You can get out earlier and stay out longer on these paddocks but have to be careful in very wet weather.

Grass vs Financial Gain

It is easy to grow grass but to graze to 4cm is the hard part. The spring of 2018 made this very difficult. I have lots of ways to do this but they all take time and labour is scarce. The way I look at it is, that it costs me around €1200 a week to keep my cattle inside. If I can get them out earlier and keep them out longer it will pay off. This spring I was giving my cows 6-8kgs of ration and bought in silage to get them ready for breeding, and this was just holding their body condition score. Good spring grass is better than 10kgs of ration and a lot cheaper. It is a difference between making money and losing it. In very bad weather cows and breeding heifers will be left out for 3 hours a day to save silage. I will put cattle out full time and block graze every 12 hours if they are not doing too much damage. The suckler cows are separated from the calves 10 days before A.I starts to get them cycling. The cows come in from the paddocks in the morning and evening to the calves. What I have found in bad weather, is by letting the paddock wire open to the roadway, the cows are then waiting on the roadway to come into the calves. This way there is a lot less damage done to the paddock.

When my cows and calves are grazing together all the wires in the paddocks are raised so the calves graze ahead of the cows. I have no creep feeder, my calves' average 1.3kgs a day weight gain for the heifers and 1.5kgs for the males. Every 0.1kgs weight gain is worth €100 to me. When you are finishing bulls you should try and get them as heavy as you can before weaning them. Bulls at grass are costing 30cent per day, inside to be finished cost €3, that's a huge saving.

Management Tools

I also cut a lot of round bales of silage to keep grass quality good. If a paddock is getting strong I will take it out. If I have plenty of grass, this is where Pasture Base comes in. It will tell you how much grass you have on the farm at all times. These paddocks yield around 5 bales per acre, most people think this is crazy but I feed the bales to the finishing bulls as they are around 75 DMD +. These bales save me around 1 tonne of ration per bull. Before this I used to feed the bulls 2.5 tonne of ration, now I feed 1.5 tonne at €250 a tonne for ration which is worth €7500 for 30 bulls. I make between 200 and 400 bales every year keeping paddocks in good condition. Paddocks are closed on the 10th of October on rotation and all stock is in by the 1st of December. If weather permits. I calve my cows to grass. Cows and heifers start calving around the 1st of February and go straight out if the weather is ok but will come in again if they are doing a lot of damage. All cows are calved by the 1st of April, therefore I have a bunch of calves only 8 weeks apart. I have only one group of animals on my farm, cows and bulling heifers are run together to make it easier for A.I.

Reseeding

I reseed around 10-15% every year, usually at the start of August, depending on how much grass I have. I pick the worst performing paddocks and will drain them if they are wet. I have a low cost method for doing this. I will burn off the paddock. If it has lots of grass I will cut it and bale it after 5 days or else get cattle in to graze it tight. After 2 weeks I will use a spring harrow and give the paddock 2 runs to make a fine seed bed. The paddock will get Lime at 2 tonne per acre and 2 bags of 10-10-20. I then sow the seed with a Vicon fertiliser spreader at 14kgs per acre. At the moment I am using Abergain (T), Aberchoice (D) and Drumbo (D). I use up to 60% Tetraploid in dry ground and 40% in heavy ground and then the field is rolled. I spray the paddock with a post emergence spray to kill the seedling weeds. It usually gets 27 units of N and I will graze it mid-September with weanlings and might get another grazing if the weather allows. All this costs around €100 per acre, I think it pays off for itself in one year. Normally you get a 2-4 tonne boost from reseeding which is worth around €105 per tonne utilised. For 2018 I will incorporate clover into some of my paddocks.

For me, the more grass I grow the more profit I make.