



Facilitation Method: Managing Grass

This facilitation method was designed in an action research process with beef, dairy and sheep farmers; advisors, specialists and scientists.



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STORY BOARDS



Building Relationships with Clients:

- 'Trust' in the adviser-client relationship and the adviser 'Knowing the Family and the Farm' is identified as an important factor in research on how farmers manage grass.
- The credibility of advisers' advice in clients' eyes is enhanced when there is a good client-adviser relationship. A 'good relationship' means that: the adviser has become in tune and familiar with the client (and his/her farm family situation); and the client has belief in the knowledge of the adviser and the relevance of that knowledge to their farm.
- The process of building trust and a good relationship between an adviser and a farmers is the foundation for achieving goals on the farm.
- In the context of a pre-farm visit (prior to a farming hosting a discussion group meeting on a farm), advisors could do either of the following exercises, or combine them, to effectively enhance the adviser-client relationship:

MATERIALS:

Folder containing:

1. Flipchart paper (can be folded in advance and placed in a A4 folder)
2. MG Picture cards (pre-supplied)
3. Black thick markers (4 as farmer(s) may wish to use)
4. Phone/camera to take photograph

CONTEXT/ENVIRONMENT:

Pre-farm visit (advisory visit prior to the farm hosting a discussion group visit)

Walk About: outdoor farm walk

Goal setting: any building, table preferable

Walk About

Go on a 'walk-about' with the farmer on the farm, or sit to have a conversation in the farm house/ buildings. You can use some of the questions below to get to know and build a relationship with the farmer, in a simple conversation.

Note: it should be made clear to the farmer client that other members of the family involved or interested in the farm are encouraged to participate in the 'walk about' / conversation and in advisory consultations in general).

- Can we go for a short walk on the farm. Is there anyone else involved in or interested in the farm who should come along?
- Can you tell me the story of the history of this farm?
- Are there other family members involved in the farm?
- Where would you like to see your farm in the future?
- What are the main areas of focus when you want advice about farming?



Goal Setting

Note: involvement of members of the family involved in the farm e.g. spouse and future heir(s) should be encouraged)

Facilitate a conversation about goals on the farm and get to know your client better. This can take place in a farm house/building and a table would make the exercise easier:

- Use the supplied set of pre-prepared 'picture-cards' which can be used like a deck of cards spread out on a table.
- The picture-cards portray some images of scenes of regular, non-agricultural life and of farming life
- Ask the farmer(s) this question: 'Can you tell me the story about your farming lives and goals? I'll listen I won't interrupt. You can use any of these pictures to tell your story if you want, but its not necessary'

Tip: This is a social scientiically deisigned question that encourages people to speak honestly about their own experiences. If the farmer pauses in answering the question, it's important not to jump in to fill the silence. The farmer will resume speaking when ready. Farmers may just look at the images or they may pick them up and put them to one side, it doesn't matter how the cards are used at this point."

- Once the farmer(s) has/have finished 'telling their story', you can thank them and underake the following exercise:

Farm Visit Facilitation Method: Managing Grass

The overall purpose of this guide is to provide a method for facilitating a productive group discussion to support farmers:

- to choose viable actions to improve how they manage grass (MG actions), and
- to develop a problem-proofed plan for achieving these actions.

A suitable context for implementing this guide is a discussion group meeting held on a host farm. A building with chairs and a table is also required.

ICE-BREAKER:

3 MINUTE CHAT

PURPOSE OF EXERCISE

- Conversation starter for the whole group.
- Focuses the group on the topic of managing grass.
- Gets farmers talking to each other about the core topic.

MATERIALS

A deck of supplied 'managing grass' (MG) action cards

PROCESS

FACILITATOR:

1. Spread out the full 'deck' of MG action-cards
2. Make the following points:
 - 'Each card describes an action a farmer might take to improve grassland management'.
 - 'We're just going to chat about some of these for 3 minutes'.
3. 'Work together in pairs; **choose one card** you want to chat about – you have **3 minutes!**'
4. '3 minutes are up, we need to wrap up the chat. Now, keep those ideas as we'll have a chance to discuss them in a minute'
5. Ensure all the **MG action-cards** are put back on the table/surface – they will be needed for the Flexible Brainstorming technique that immediately follows.

FLEXIBLE BRAINSTORMING

PURPOSE OF EXERCISE

- Opportunity for farmers to generate a set of actions for improving grassland management
- Provides the host farmer/family with a broad range of actions to consider, including some s/he may not have previously known about or considered
- Takes into account the particular experiences of this farmer discussion group
- Helps to develop a sense of farmers' ownership of the discussion

Tip: The role of the host farmer. The host is a 'key expert' about what makes good sense for his or her farm and it's important they are standing up with the facilitator and taking a key role as owner of this process

MATERIALS

1. The deck of pre-prepared MG action cards (as above)
2. Stairs chart for hanging (on which to place the cards)
3. Blank MG action cards (for new additions)
4. Post-It notes
5. Markers/pens
6. Phone/camera to take photograph of outcome of Flexible Brainstorming technique.

THE PROCESS

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FLEXIBLE BRAINSTORMING

PROCESS

FACILITATOR

1. Make sure the full 'deck' of MG action-cards, spread out on a surface, is visible to everyone.
2. Show farmers the photo example of a completed Stairs chart: 'we'll discuss and sort these cards first and then we'll put them on a step by step plan, as shown here'
3. Make the following points:
 - 'We have this 'deck' of cards (that you've already seen); each one describes an action that farmers might use to improve grassland management on their farms'.
 - These MG actions might, or might not, make good sense for this farm.

- Go through the deck to pick out MG actions that could improve grassland management on this farm.
 - Set aside any action cards that do not make sense for this farm
 - If required, turn over a MG action card, rephrase in your own words, and add it to your selection'.
4. Encourage discussion.
 5. Host farmer/family identifies actions that make good sense for their farm.
 6. Place these MG action cards in the centre of the work-surface.
 7. Make the following points:
 - Now we want to brainstorm.
 - You have selected some actions.
 - What other actions would you add that might improve grassland management on this farm?
 8. Encourage farmers to brainstorm to generate new actions.

9. Each new action is written on a new card N.B. one MG action per card
10. New cards are added to the previous selection.
11. Photograph the final set of action cards.

OUTCOME:

A range of MG actions that make good sense for the host farm

CARD SORT

SELECTING SHORT-TERM PRIORITY ACTIONS & PROBLEM PROOFING

PURPOSE OF EXERCISE

- Enables host to consider key criteria that may affect her/his choice of priority actions.
- Enables host to choose 2-3 priority MG actions that are likely to be feasibly implemented on her/his farm.
- Enables host, group, and adviser to discuss priority (short-term) MG actions and problem-proof them.
- Opportunity for farmer/family to benefit from other farmers' knowledge re. MG actions.
- Opportunity for farmers to benefit from knowledge the facilitator can share re. MG actions.

MATERIALS

1. Blank stairs chart
2. Criteria sheet (A4)
3. Post-It notes
4. Markers/pens

THE PROCESS

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PROCESS

FACILITATOR

1. The selected 'actions' are already on the table/work-surface.
2. Now place the criterion sheet and blank Post-Its alongside these.
3. Make the following points:
 - Here's the full set of actions you selected.
 - Now you need to choose your priority 2-3 that you can undertake in the short term
 - But first, let's talk about what you (host) have to take into account when you think about any new action to improve grassland management on this farm.
 - From recent research with other farmers, we learned that farmers prefer MG actions that, for their farm, at a particular point in time are:

SELECTION CRITERIA:

Cost-effective (on that particular farm)

Impactful (a 'reasonable' benefit for 'reasonable' effort and investment)

Achievable (on this farm, considering availability of labour, infrastructure etc.).

Note: the A4 'Selection Criteria' sheet should be shown to the farmers

Say to host: 'You might want to add something else (another criterion) that's very important to you, something you have to take into account that might be very specific to this farm.'

4. Encourage host to name any other criteria s/he thinks important.
5. Record additional criteria on Post-It notes and add to the A4 criteria sheet.
6. Make sure the criteria sheet remains visible to everyone as the activity of choosing the priority 2-3 actions proceeds.

7. ASK HOST: Given you have to take these things into account, can you now choose your priority 2/3 MG ACTIONS for this farm?
8. Farmer selects her/his priority actions from set of cards (from Flexible Brainstorming result).

Say to host: Before we plot these actions on the step (STAIRS) chart (show chart) let's 'problem-proof' them.

9. Facilitator provides all relevant information host might need: this may include scientific or research information but also practical implementation advice from other farmers.
10. What might aid the implementation of each action?
11. What might frustrate the implementation of each action?
12. 'Now we're ready to plot these actions on the STAIRS chart'.

TIMELINE

Staging of Actions on Stairs Chart: MG Action Plan

Note to Facilitator: The following activity may or may not be feasible, depending on unknown factors. The host may have chosen just one action, or more than three. Some actions may be implementable in a 'stand-alone' manner. Others may be interrelated and cannot be 'divided up' neatly into specific actions that can be mapped on a linear Timeline.

The facilitator's main task is to continue to facilitate discussion and promote confidence among the discussion group in relation to trying out actions. Concentrate on what seems to be making sense to the host at this point.

1. To host: 'Look at this Stairs on which steps are represented'.
2. 'Taking your problem-proofed 2/3 MG actions for improving grassland management on this farm, can you place them on the stairs? What period of time does the first step represent: 1 year or 2 years?'
3. 'Would you choose any other MG actions for the following time period?'
4. 'Are there any other MG actions you would follow up with in the longer term? Place these on subsequent steps'
5. In what period of time will they be achievable (e.g. 2-3 years)?'

OUTCOME:

Host has at least 2-3 first actions s/he believes are implementable and possibly more, which are placed on subsequent steps, and will be discussed a year later.



CLOSING EXERCISE COMPLETION OF MEMBERS' STAIRS CHART/ MG ACTIONS PLANS

PURPOSE OF EXERCISE

Enables farmers (working in pairs) to complete A4 card versions of the Stairs chart/ MG action plans (one each, applied to their own farms). Provides each visiting farmer with a concrete plan to take away with her/him.

MATERIALS

1. Blank pre-prepared Stair charts (pre-supplied in a pad of A4 cards))
2. Markers/pens
3. Camera/phone to photograph Stairs charts

PROCESS

FACILITATOR

1. Invite farmers to work in pairs.
2. Each farmer writes 2-6 actions on his/her A4 Stairs chart that range from the 'easy wins' to more long term goals.
3. While this is happening, the facilitator pairs up with the host farmer and they make an A4 version of the Stairs chart that the farmer can keep. This is also an opportunity to 'copper-fasten' the MG plan on a one to one basis between the farmer and the facilitator/adviser.

4. Farmers photograph each other's A4 Stairs chart. Facilitator photographs all A4 Stairs charts for printing for future meetings.

OUTCOME:

All discussion group members have generated Stairs charts/ MG action plans, which can be used in subsequent Discussion Group meetings. Members can work in fours (i.e., two pairs together), discussing for 10-15 minutes their experiences of further considering/implementing the MG actions they identified for their farms.

With the facilitator, they can re-visit their Stairs charts/ MG action plans, and report on progress, issues experienced etc. They are also preparing for their own discussion group meeting as a host farmer.

Group Work:

Five Ingredients for Success.



"We might all be different as individuals but our group has common goals. We as members genuinely believe in and commit to these goals. Our group is well organised and we have a clear idea about how we operate. We have our schedule of meetings well in advance so that we can plan and prepare"



"Enjoyment and fun is an important part of how our group works. It makes taking part a more positive experience. We have developed good working relationships and even some friendships. This provides an environment conducive to sharing challenges and to identifying solutions."



"In order for use as group to create solutions, we must feel that we can speak openly and truthfully without feeling that what we say might be irrelevant or not useful... We are all different, we speak different languages, and it's important that we show that we value each other's point of view. There's no sense that certain types of knowledge are superior in the group and people are not afraid to speak up"



"While the proverbial saying 'a rising tide lifts all boats' may not be true in many cases, it is a core principle of this group. What we do is relevant to all members and therefore is of interest (and potential benefit) to all members"



"We have access to and are exposed to different types of expertise in the group and this is a major driver of the group – it is why we want to be involved. Our group is also expertly facilitated and if we didn't have that expert facilitation, our group wouldn't operate as well as it does"

Self-Appraisal for Groups: Guide for Facilitators

This assessment sheet is designed to assist you to facilitate a structured conversation about how the group you facilitate is functioning and how it might function better.

The sheet is divided into five components, which correspond to five key ingredients for successful groups. These key ingredients were identified through research undertaken in Ireland and are consistent with research findings internationally in relation to how groups function at their best.

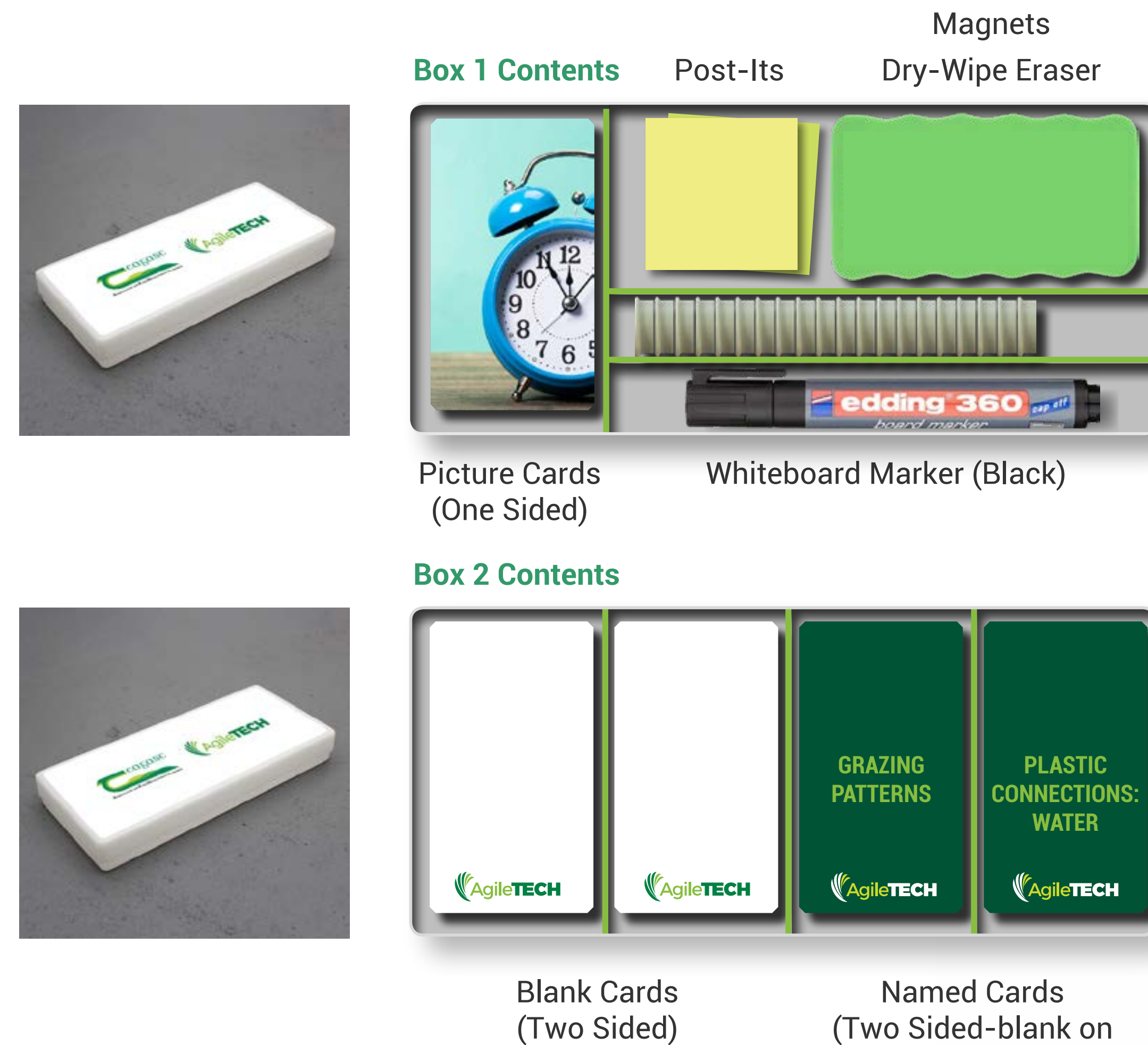
HOW TO USE THE SHEET:

1. Distribute a copy of the appraisal sheet to each of the group member present.
2. Allow an appropriate time (10 minutes suggested) for each member to complete the sheet.
3. Prior to the meeting, you will have placed the A0 (flip chart size) version of the appraisal sheet on a flipchart stand.
4. Distribute 10 self-adhesive discs to each group member. All discs should be of the same size and colour.
5. Once the allocated time has elapsed, invite each member to mark their answers onto the A0 size poster on the flipchart. In this way, each individual group member has an equal opportunity to record their views anonymously.
6. Take a short break to visually review the scatter of sticky discs under each question. It is likely that the collective answer i.e. the arrangement of the adhesive discs under each answer will shed some light on group perceptions.
7. Use the questions listed below to prompt further appraisal and reflection within your group. Pose the questions to the group and allow them time to respond. Make sure to acknowledge the questions where the perceptions are positive (you want more of that in the future) as well as probing how to improve the situation where perceptions are less positive/ negative (what can we do to improve?).
8. Record the decisions reached and agreed actions, including the individual(s) responsible. Ideally, group members would take responsibility for many of the actions.
9. At the end of the meeting, photograph the A0 worksheet and email a copy to aine.mackenwalsh@teagasc.ie

SELF APPRAISAL SHEET

1. Do you have shared goals in this group		
members have different goals	We have some shared goals	Many shared goals
2. Is the schedule of meetings clear and predictable		
Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
3. Do you feel comfortable talking truthfully in the group		
Some people don't feel comfortable sharing	Most members feel comfortable, most of the time	Yes, we all feel comfortable sharing
4. Do you think members feel comfortable <i>challenging</i> others within the group		
Sometimes members feel offended by others	There's a challenging but mostly positive atmosphere	We readily and positively challenge each other
5. Are the meetings enjoyable to attend?		
Sometimes	Most of the time	Always very enjoyable
6. In this group, are the activities relevant and interesting to all members, do you think?		
Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
7. If you were to pick one word to describe this group, what would it be?		
Hard to pick a word	A positive word:	A not so positive word:
8. Can you please comment on the facilitation of this group		
9. Can you give an example of a very well facilitated meeting or event that you attended (name the event, meeting, farm etc.)		
10. Are there any other issues you would like to mention /address?		

The Grassland management action pack



MG ACTION PACK

Box 1
Box2
Handbook
Criteria Sheets
Timeline Stairs Charts



MAGNETIC TABLE-TOP TIMELINE STAIRS CHART

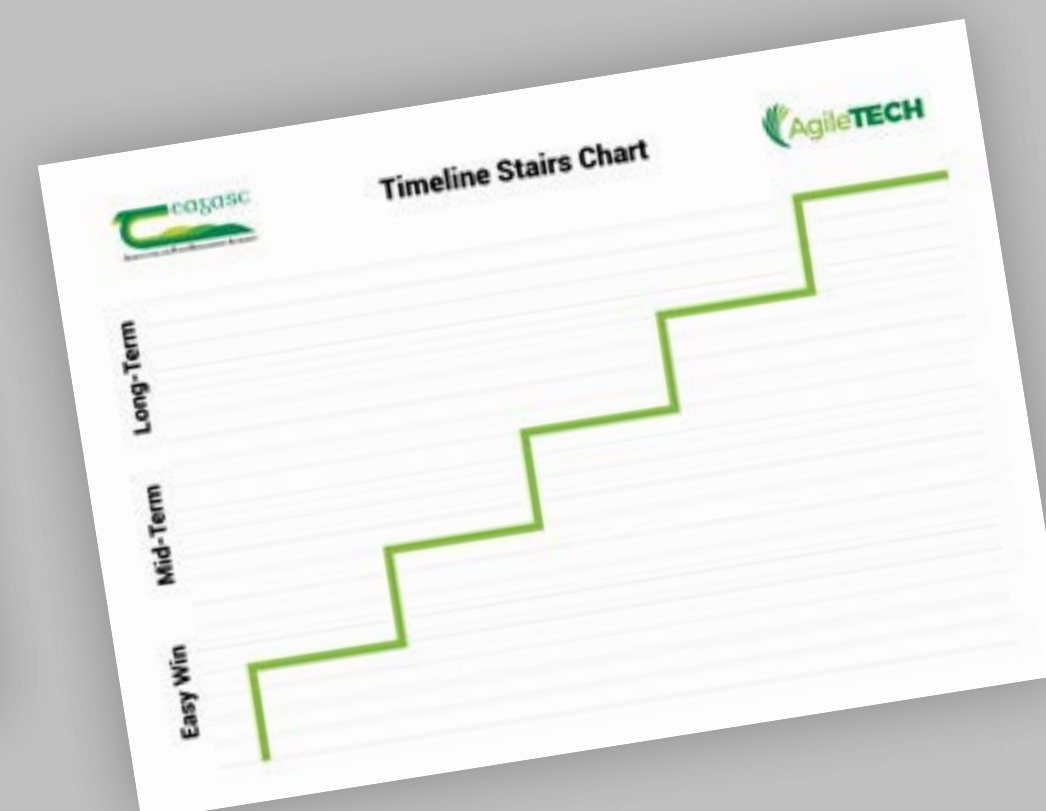
Comes with tough polyester carry case



Handbook



Criteria

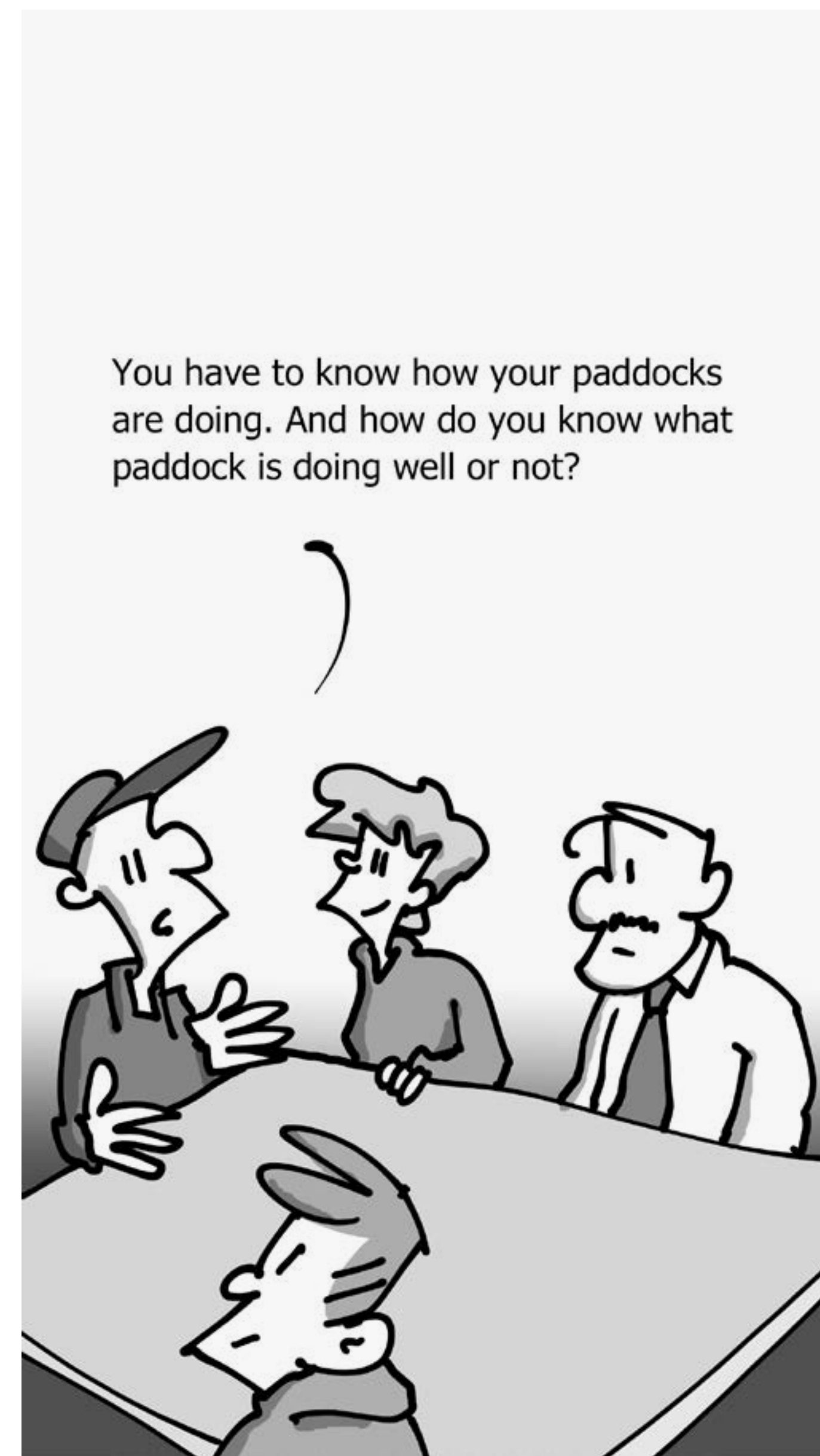


Timeline Stairs Charts



FORTY EXTRA BALES

Page 1



FORTY EXTRA BALES

Page 2

But unless you know what's in your paddock. How do you know when to take it out? And have you enough for the sheep coming forward?



I remember, just to throw in a little story. I remember when I started I got my blade meter from grass tech and the whole lot and started off on Monday morning bright and early the sun was shining. The two neighbours looking down on me they were chatting about cattle and they were saying what is that eejit doing now.



It took two or three years, one came late in the evening will you show me what you are doing. But he didn't want the other fella to see I was showing him.



But, I'd say that's the way it was a few years ago but I don't think it's that way anymore.



FORTY EXTRA BALES

Page 3

It's the same way in our house. I had to beat my husband into a discussion group, you know, and now under the darkness of night he will admit that he's into it and he'll look for the grass gauge on a Monday and stuff like that. But he won't say that in the pub on a Saturday night I can tell you.



Now I'm on a roll like you know... If you're not honest that you want to change things, you won't do anything, you won't start. Because there's a bit of work involved... putting up paddocks, achieving quality, measuring grass and things like that. I fecking dream of grass at night now. I actually do.

CALL EMERGENCY
FESCUE!



I can give you example, three years ago, I used to buy all my silage. Two years ago I used to buy half the silage, last year I bought none. And this year I've forty bales extra than I need.



FORTY EXTRA BALES

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THE GRASS PLANT

Page 1



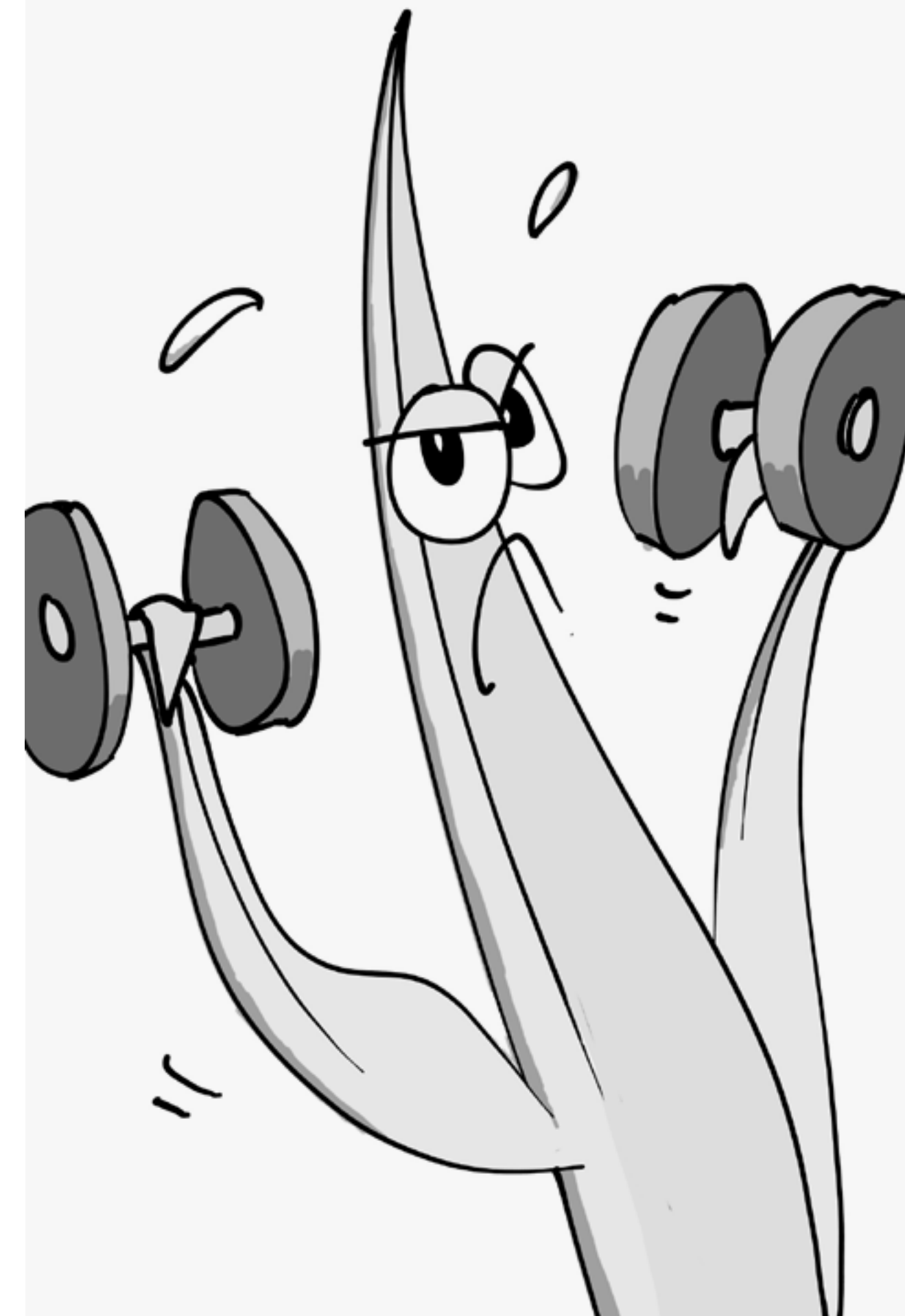
THE GRASS PLANT

Page 2

The grass plant behaves itself until summer. But then, the plant goes into a reproductive phase, once it's going to head out, you really need to control it at that stage.



The goal of the grass plant is to produce seed-heads. Come hell or high water it wants to reproduce itself. It's a survival thing.



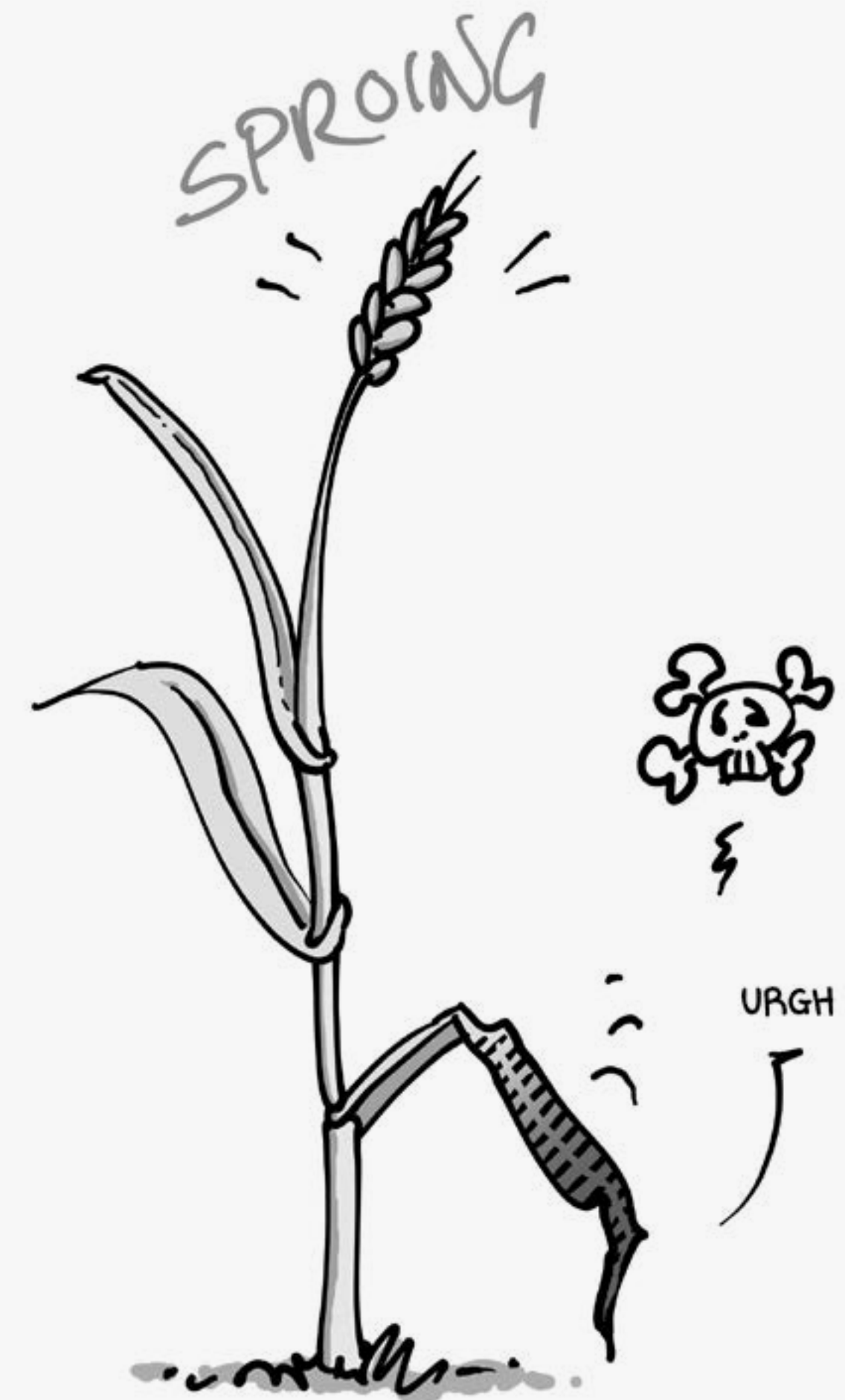
So, the plant sends up a new leaf every seven days, it'll put up 3 leaves, one every week - that's three weeks, 21 days.



THE GRASS PLANT

Page 3

If the last and fourth leaf of its lifecycle is allowed to head, it's too late, the rest will start dying away.



It depends on the weather, but from around Mid May, the grass needs to be topped or closed off for silage between 15-21 days after the first leaf is put up.



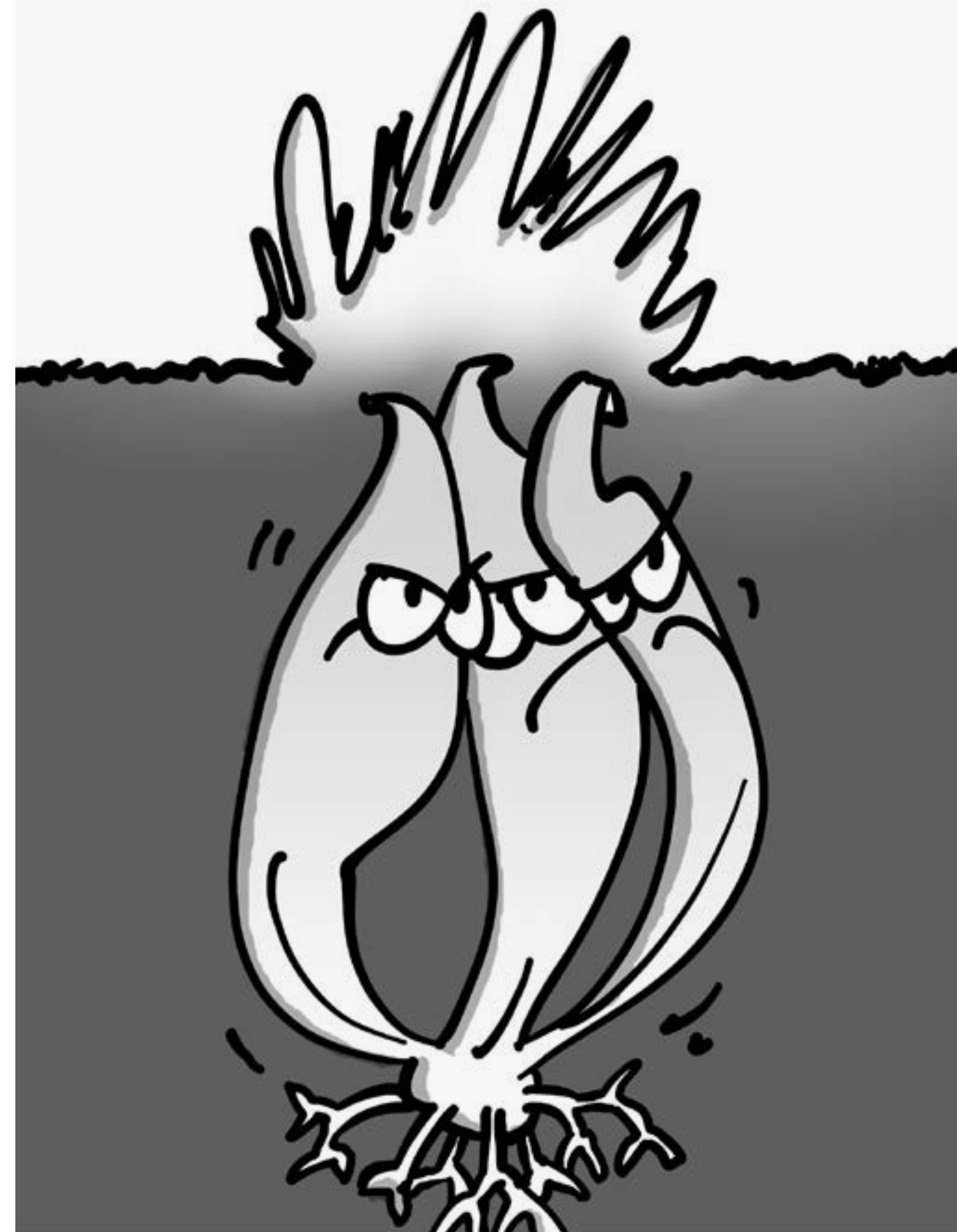
If you go past the 15-21 days, the grass will become stemmy and will be poor quality. The grass plant will put up a seed head and become woody.



THE GRASS PLANT

Page 4

As well as that, the dead leaves will form a butt of white and prevent more growth.



As long as you graze, top it or cut silage, it should start all over again –

Keep going grazing every 15-21 days up until around mid August

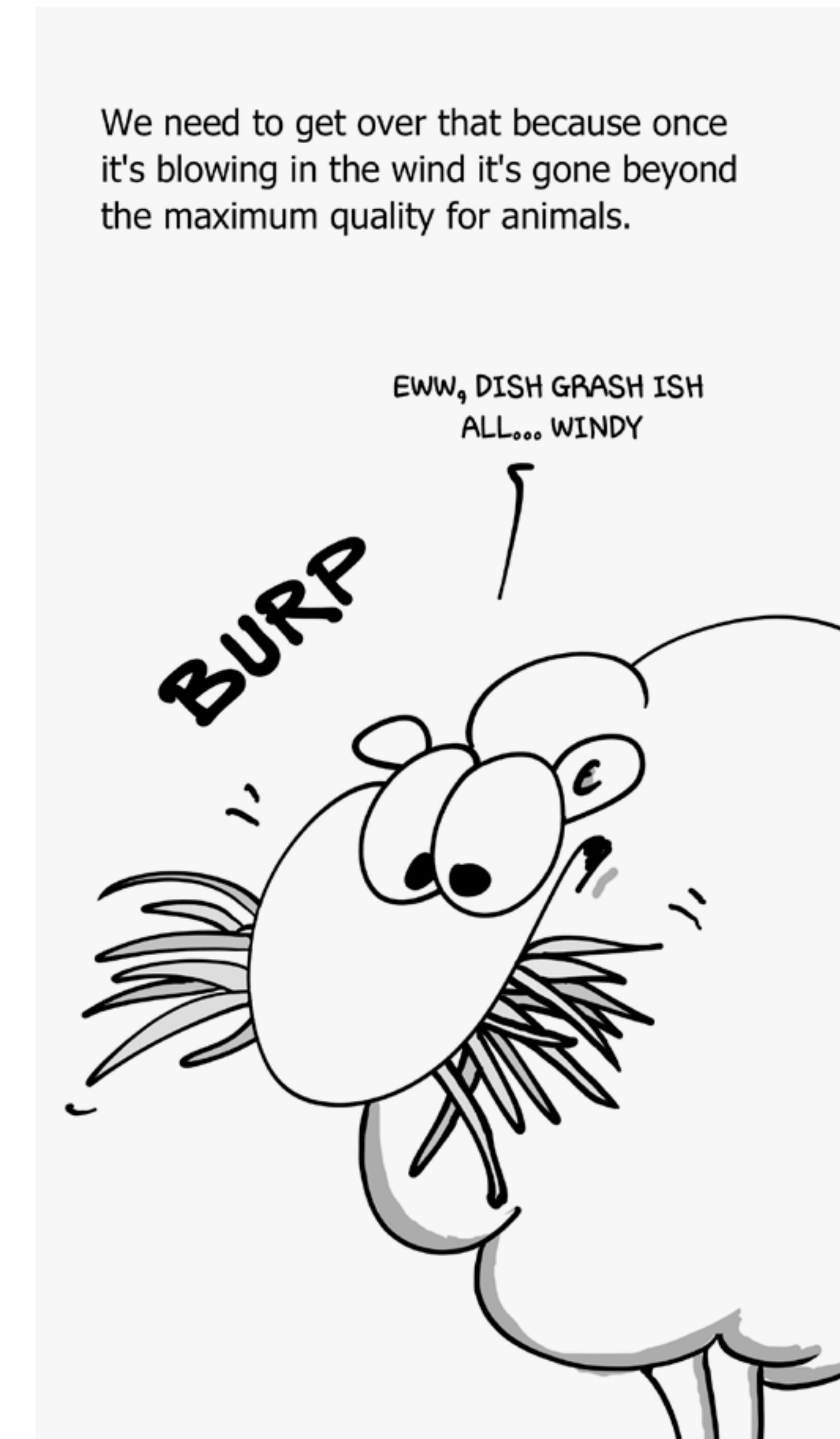


Keep on top of it between May and August and then the grass plant will go back into its vegetative state, its reproductive stage will be over. You'll have the best of grass and silage got at that stage.



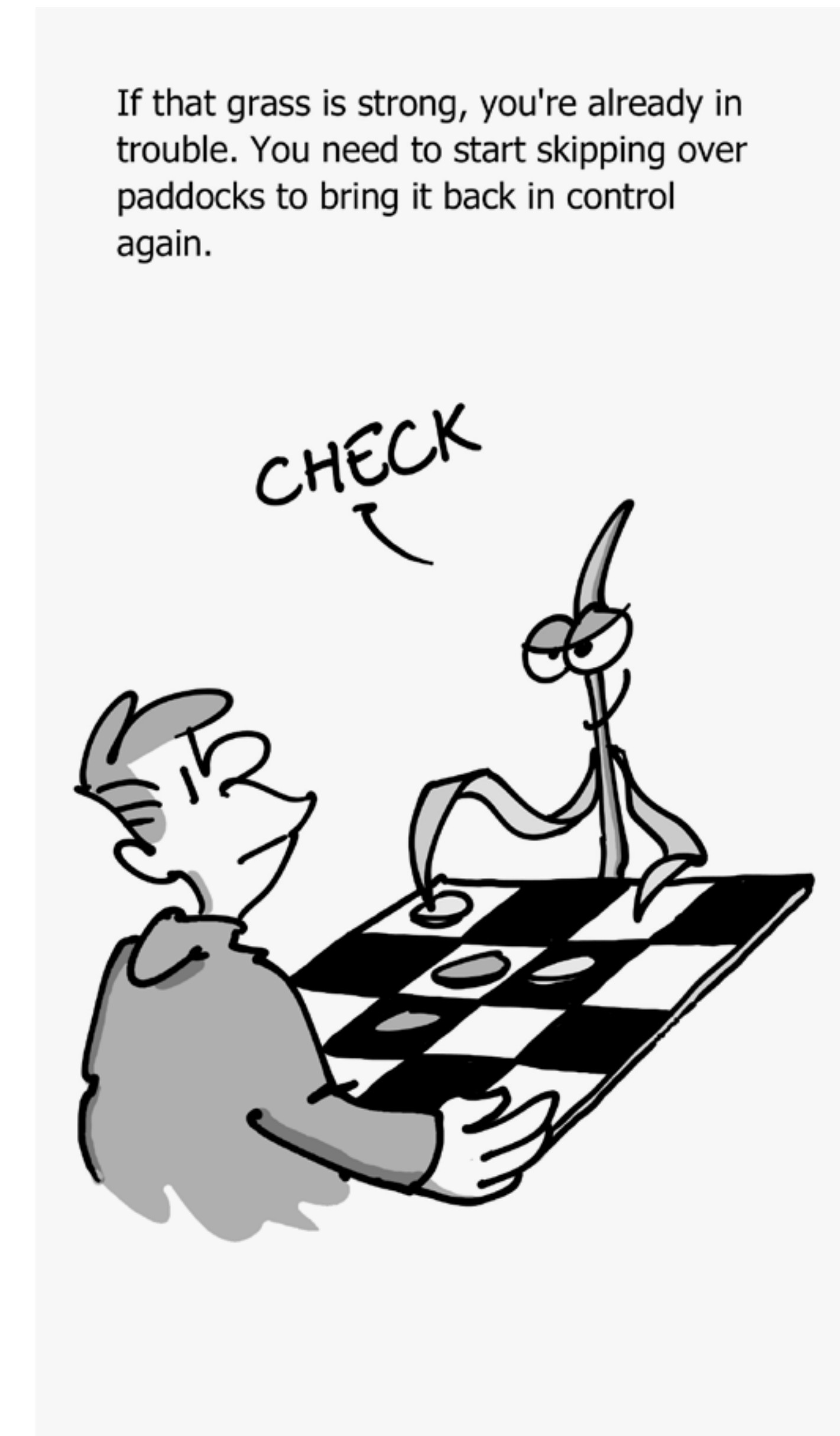
SEVEN DAYS AHEAD

Page 1



SEVEN DAYS AHEAD

Page 2



SEVEN DAYS AHEAD

Page 3

For guys who are not grass measuring, they need to be doing this seven days ahead to give them a way of knowing what's going on.



It's not a bad way to manage grass when you're not measuring. Farmers are very good at visualising grass. But, there is such a thing as too much grass...



... as well as too little. A field of grass may be blowing in the wind, but it's actually gone beyond quality. you might think it's 10 /10 but the fact is it **WAS** 10 /10 and has reduced down to 5 /10 in terms of quality.

IT'S LIKE THESE SPUDS.
YOU'RE WAITING FOR
THEM TO BE DONE AND
THEN THEY'RE GONE TO
MUSH, POITEACH
BEFORE YOU KNOW IT!



SEVEN DAYS AHEAD

Page 4

You need to keep on top of the weather big time – measuring or no measuring. If we have a temperature of 4-5 degrees and cloud down on top of you, you won't have much grass growth.



Once you've full sun and wind is southerly, your farm is going to grow well. It's going to take off on me at an awful rate: I might need to fertilise and close off more ground for silage...

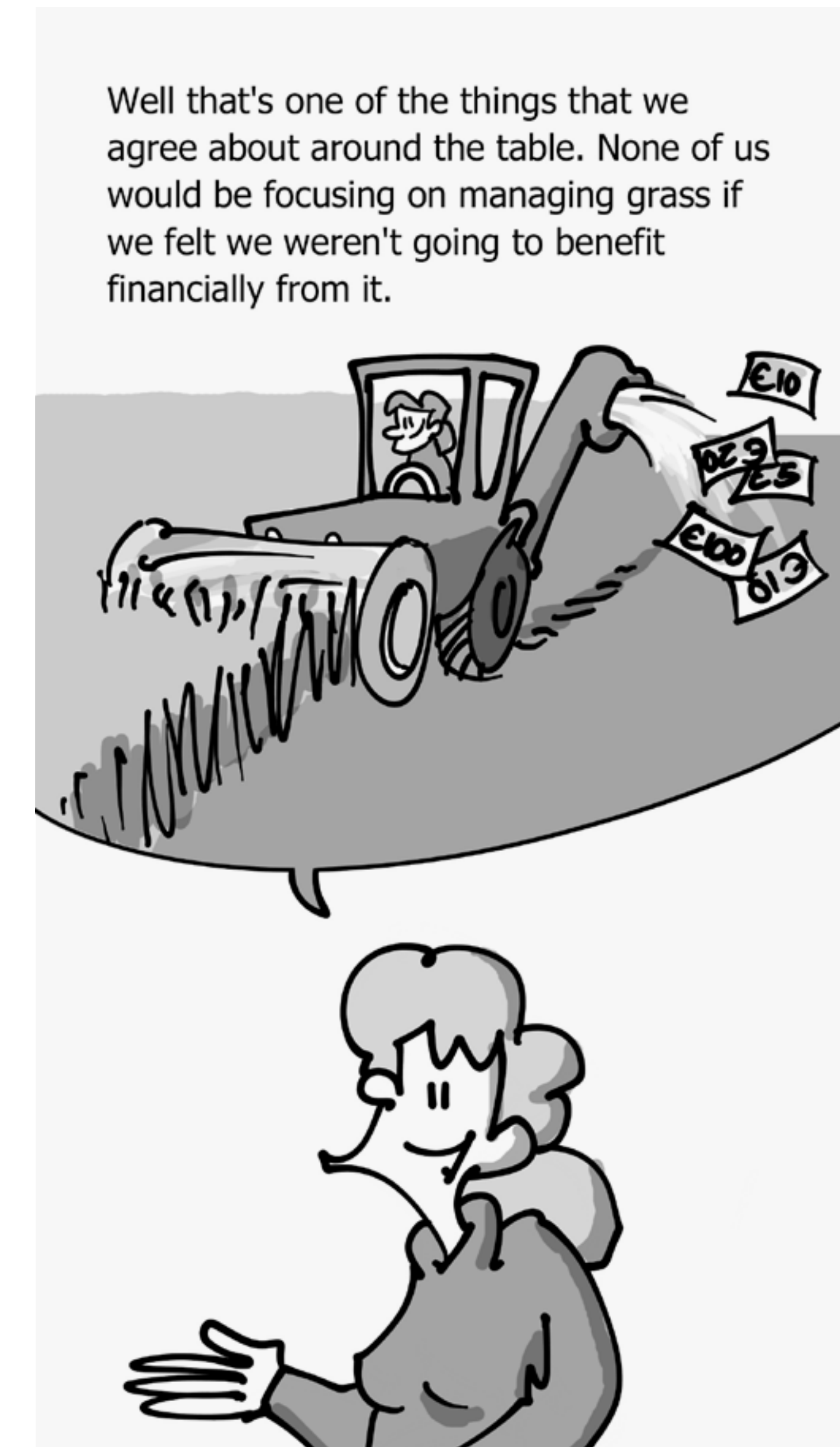
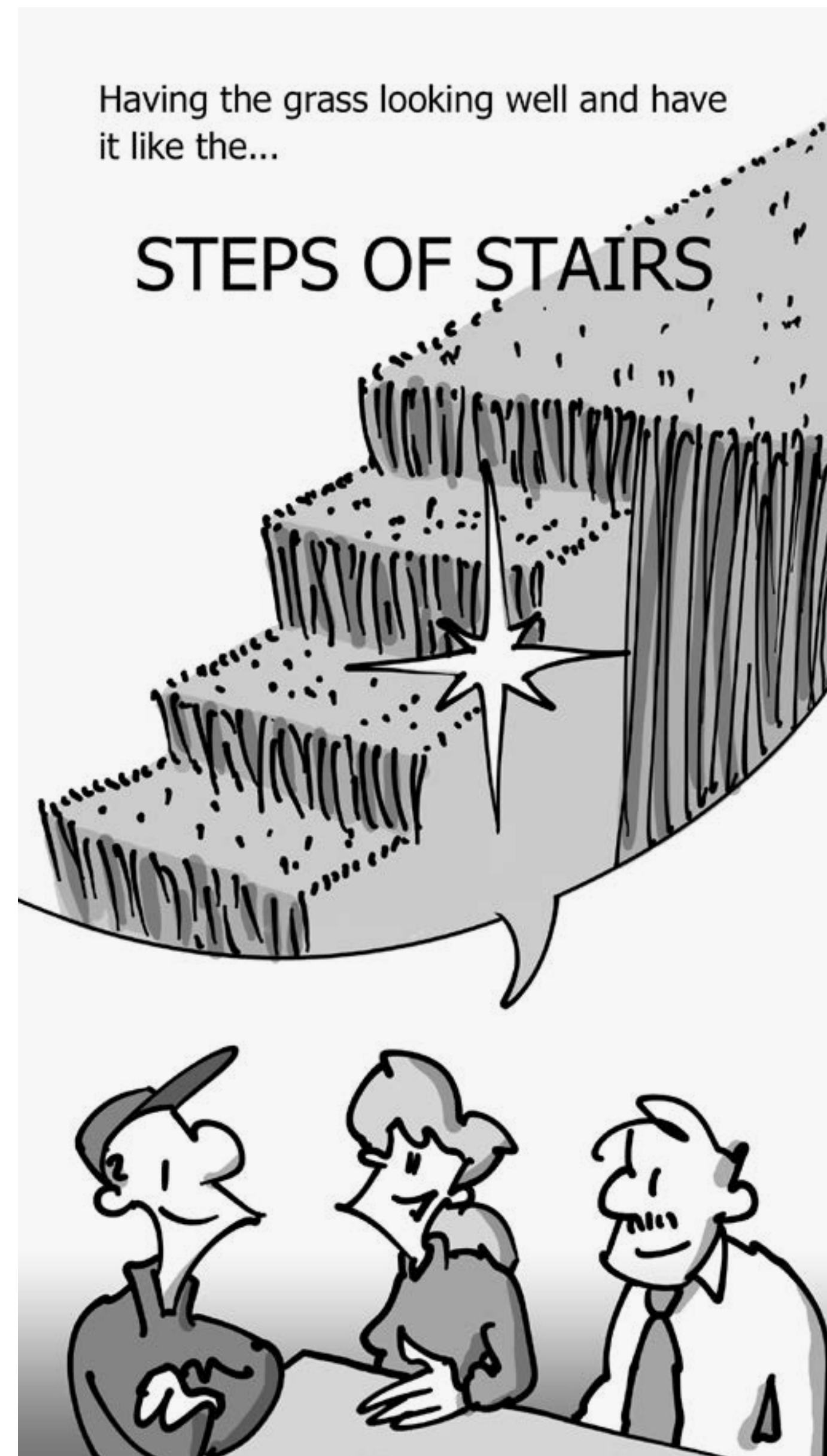


But if it's not, I might leave well enough alone.



STEPS OF STAIRS

Page 1



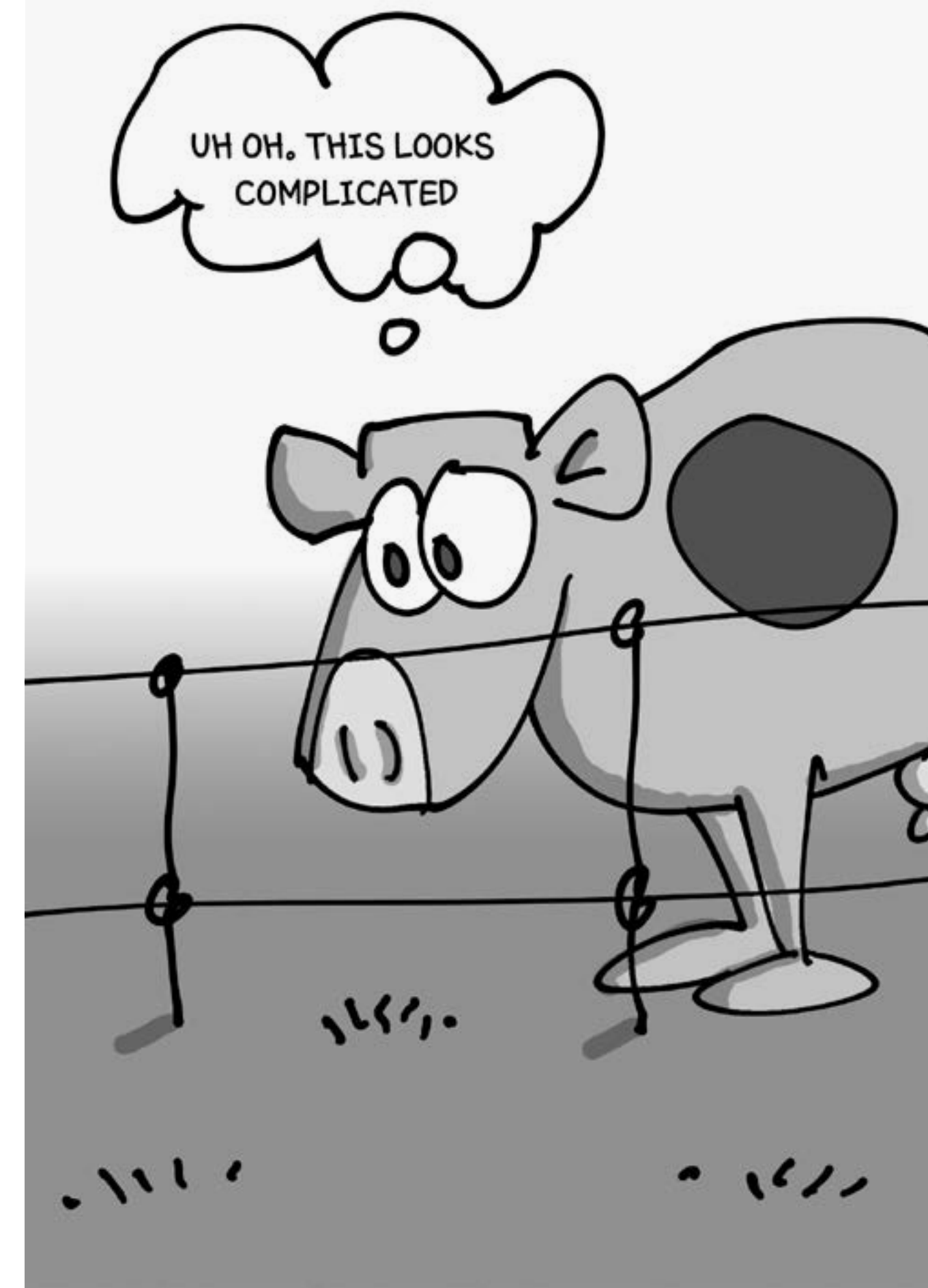
STEPS OF STAIRS

Page 2

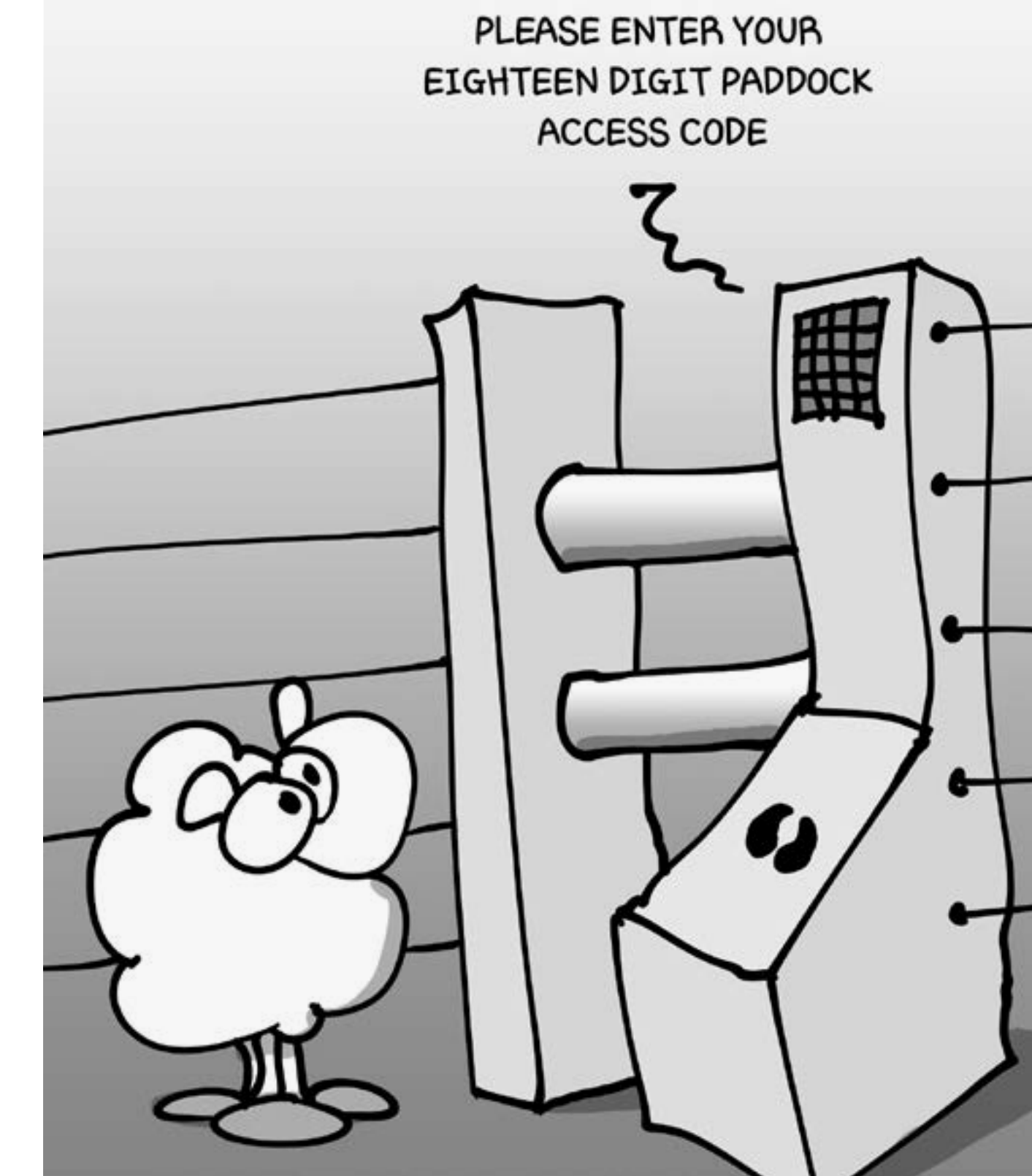
And the first thing that, when I started to become aware of grassland management, in the back of my mind was, well, that's a huge extra cost. And I'm not in a situation where I can spend all that money.



But in fact grassland management need not be an expensive fencing paddock system... Half a dozen pigtales and couple of reels and good fence does wonders.



And, I think, it's something that people may be put off by... Simply by presuming that they have to spend a lot of money on a water course, or water systems and fencing and all the rest of it. So you can do it cheap and cheerful and it can be effective.



STEPS OF STAIRS

Page 4

Reseeding shouldn't be seen as the only show in town. And even old grass sods are seen to improve dramatically by good management. You can actually improve the bottom line, simply by dealing with what you've got. And that certainly was brought home by the people in our group.



It needn't cost the earth to have good grass management. That's what we've got there.

