

DAIRY

August 2020

Building grass covers happens in August

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Teagasc researcher, DONAL PATTON, recently spoke about the importance of grass budgeting and its role in autumn grassland management.

Q. How important is grass budgeting?

A. The grass budget is the most important grazing technology, and has the potential to reduce milk production costs by €100/cow/year (or approximately 2 cent/litre). At low stocking rates, it is relatively easy to achieve a long grazing season with minimal feed inputs. As stocking rate increases, this becomes more difficult and there is a danger that costs of production may increase as a result. The grass budget is essential to prevent spiralling feed costs and is used for five months of the grazing season.

Q. How do you use a grass budget?

A. We find that from October 1 until April 5 (six months) grass demand is greater than supply and that we have to use a grass budget to plan how the herd can be fed during this period. We make our decisions based on how close our actual farm cover is to the target line.

Q. What are some of the challenges to building covers?

A. Some people find it hard to switch from a focus on maintaining pre-grazing cover at 1,400kg DM/ha to allowing pre-grazing covers to move a little higher. You need to switch the focus from looking at the wedge to tracking the budget. Building covers is obviously more challenging on highly stocked farms (you need to start building earlier, and you may need to

feed in August). You also need to continue to measure grass weekly; if you measure less frequently, you will be slower to react to deficits.

Q. How do you extend the grazing season in the autumn?

A. Extra grazing days in the autumn are achieved by building cover during August; reaching peak is all about what happens in August (**Figure 1**). You need 15-20kg difference between growth and demand over five weeks to build the cover.

Q. How can the autumn grazing targets be adapted?

A. There are three potential adaptations: (1) build lower peak covers on heavier soils (but you still need a budget); (2) build higher closing covers for more compact calving patterns; and, (3) check that you are set up to utilise the grass

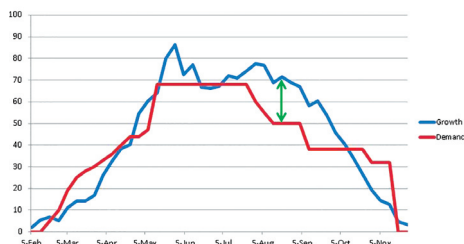


FIGURE 1: Reaching peak is all about what happens in August.

built up for the autumn – if you are not set up to graze it, there is very little point in growing it. Many farms are well set up with grazing infrastructure on 70-80% of their area, but often need to improve roadways and fencing on the parts that are only grazed in spring and autumn. August is a good month to sort out these deficits in infrastructure if your capital expenditure budgets allow.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Moving machines bring danger

For the year to date, farm workplace deaths are above average (14 to mid July), so it is vital to give farm safety foremost attention to prevent further tragedy. August is harvest month, with a lot of machinery movement including grain trailers, bales and silage. Movement brings danger, particularly to bystanders, including children and older farmers. In August also, a lot of use is made of powered machines. Always ensure that machine moving parts are guarded, particularly machines used in a stationary position,



Harvest brings danger.

e.g., augers, or slurry vacuum tankers. Persons entangled in machine moving parts suffer horrific injuries. It is vital also to continue to implement Covid-19 prevention guidelines to eliminate this deadly virus.

Do you have a grazing plan for August?

PastureBase Ireland data highlights that grass cover targets are not met on most dairy farms in the autumn. This suggests that grass covers are not being built during August – a crucial month for this task. While the silage area comes back into play on many farms, helping to lengthen the rotation towards 30 days



on September 1, further additional actions also help, including the removal of non-milking stock from the milking platform, the introduction of additional feed (baled silage, meal or both), or a combination of both. Whatever the choice, it is better that action is taken sooner rather than later. The grazing targets for August are outlined in

Table 1. Remember to walk your paddocks weekly to record the actual grass covers.

Table 1: August grass cover targets.

Date	Cover per LU (kg DM/LU)		Average farm cover (kg DM/ha)		Rotation length (days)	
Stocking rate	2.5	3.0	2.5	3.0	2.5	3.0
August 1	170	170	425	510	20	20
August 15	200	250	500	750	25	25
September 1	300	330	750	990	30	30

Summer mastitis

Summer mastitis is an acute disease of the non-lactating mammary gland and is mainly caused by the bacterium *Trueperella pyogenes*, with flies being central to its transmission. Very few affected quarters recover. Heifers and cows with summer mastitis are best isolated to prevent the spread of the mastitis between animals.



Various management practices can be put in place to help reduce the incidence of summer mastitis:

1. Flies should be controlled from early in the fly season, using products containing synthetic pyrethroids, which are available in pour-on preparations, or impregnated fly tags.

Depending on the product used, it may need to be repeated regularly during the summer season.

2. Avoid grazing cows/in-calf heifers in fields that have a history of summer mastitis incidences. These tend to be fields that are near rivers or marshy areas, or where there is a high density of trees/hedges, where flies tend to populate. More exposed pastures are preferred, as high winds inhibit fly activity.
3. Observe and check animals on a regular basis, as early detection aids treatment.
4. In the case of autumn-calving and cull cows recently dried off, good hygiene measures at drying off and the use of teat sealers are essential.
5. Finally, it is important to discuss any treatment strategies with your veterinary practitioner.

Break the cycle of late-calving cows



Breeding for spring calving 2021 should be finished on most dairy farms.

In last month's newsletter, we highlighted that "once July begins, the countdown to the end of the breeding season has begun". Breeding for spring calving 2021 should be finished on most dairy farms by now. Yet figures suggest that this has been far from the case in previous years – 12% of dairy calvings occurred in May (9%) and June (3%) in recent years.

It is very challenging to correct a spread calving pattern, but continuing to breed until later in the year will continue the pattern (**Table 2**). So you have to make a decision to break the cycle by finishing the breeding season now.

Where calving pattern is spread out, there may be a few extra empty cows compared to other years. There should be a plan in place to deal with this situation. The empty cows can be milked through the winter and sold as higher value culls in the spring. Replace these cows with early calving

heifers. The heifers will produce more milk than late-calving cows next year, will correct the calving pattern and will hopefully stay in the herd for longer. You may need to buy in some extra, suitable, early spring-calving replacement heifers; this should be planned for in good time.

Table 2: Expected calving date based on breeding date (assuming 285 days gestation).

Breeding date	Expected calving date
July 30	May 11
August 10	May 22
August 30	June 1

Finally, now is a good time to organise a pregnancy scanning (five to seven weeks after the last service date is recommended), and once the results are available, review your breeding season performance.