

DAIRY

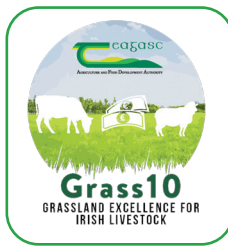
March 2021

Getting back on track!

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Grazing has got off to a slow start in 2021 due to wet weather. While the growth of grass is about normal, the turnout of cows has been delayed. We have now entered catch-up mode on most farms. The objective is to get moving in terms of grazing the farm. Many farms will have got very little grazing completed in February. However, grass supply is still very good on farms, with the average farm cover (AFC) close to 900kg DM/ha on March 1 (PastureBase Ireland figures). Where slurry spreading and nitrogen (N) fertiliser application have taken place, the response in grass growth has been very good. The aim must be to keep grass in the diet of dairy cows as much as possible during March.

Every dairy farmer will need to examine the farm for grass supply during March. It is important to keep an eye on the recovery of the



first paddocks grazed. During March, it is important to walk the farm to ensure that there is enough grass available in April to start the second rotation. There needs to be four to five paddocks with a good level of grass recovery to know when the second rotation can begin in April.

The proportion of the farm grazed in February and level of grass recovery on these paddocks will determine when the second rotation will begin.

If very little grazing has taken place in February, the spring rotation plan will need to be adjusted. A quick guide is to try to get 33% of the farm grazed by St Patrick's Day, another 33% by April 1, and aim to start the second rotation in mid April.

For those who measure grass, the AFC should not drop below 550kg DM/ha at any time, otherwise grass growth will be compromised.

Even the highest-quality silage being fed as cows approach peak production will have a negative impact on milk yield, as well as denting the energy intake of cows as they approach the breeding season, which should be avoided.

In driving terms, it is the equivalent of going

from fourth gear to third, instead of moving into fifth! You can graze all your grass in March if you want, but don't expect to also have enough grass in early April, so plan your grazing to ensure a smooth transition from March to April. Remember, you can't have your cake and eat it too!



Make sure that the lightest heifers have priority access to the best grass.

Early turnout to grass of replacement heifers

Studies have shown that early spring grass can support liveweight gains of up to 1.0kg per head per day. Make sure that the lightest heifers have priority access to the best grass, as they have the most ground to make up. While underfoot conditions are generally challenging at the moment, this could change quickly as day length increases throughout March. If grass becomes scarcer during March, supplementation with 1-2kg of a cereal such as rolled barley will help to

sustain continued growth.

Target weights at breeding are 315-330kg liveweight for Holstein Friesian heifers and approximately 300-315kg and 290kg respectively for British Friesian and first cross Holstein X Jerseys. With roughly 60 days from March 1 until May 1, liveweight gains of approximately 60kg can be expected, so Holstein Friesian heifers weighing less than approximately 260kg should be prioritised this spring.

Supplementing grass to improve milk solids yield

Spring-calving cows should be on a rising plane of feed intake and milk solids yield through the latter half of the first rotation. Grass intakes of about 14kg dry matter per day, offered as two grazings, provide an excellent quality base in the diet. Providing the correct rate and type of supplementary concentrate can deliver an economic response and set up the herd for a good lactation yield. Results of a grazing experiment completed in Teagasc Moorepark (**Table 1**) showed a good milk and body condition score (BCS) response to feeding 3kg of concentrate in early spring, with little effect on grass utilisation. Feeding up to 6kg produced a milk response, but at a significantly declining rate. Un-supplemented cows milked relatively well also, but did so at the expense of body condition.

In terms of a carryover effect, the cows fed 3kg or 6kg had a similar milk yield through the summer, while the un-supplemented cows' yield remained lower during that period. These results indicate that spring feeding 3-4kg of



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concentrate with good intakes of grass will set up the herd for a good peak yield. A 5-6kg rate may be warranted on farms during times when grass intake is limited.

Concentrate type is important as well as rate. The guidelines for choosing concentrates are:

- high-energy rations are needed (0.94 to 0.96 UFL per kg as-fed basis) – high-energy ingredients include barley, maize, beet pulp, soybean, distillers, hulls, etc.;
- protein levels: 14% for the first rotation where two grazings a day can be achieved, 16% where at least one grazing per day will be done (note that for derogation farms, the maximum protein in grazing rations will be 15% from April 1 until September – speak to your advisor for details);
- include Cal Mag at the correct rate for level of feeding to prevent tetany (55g total needed); and,
- calcium and phosphorus (P), salt and trace minerals should be fed in the first two rotations also.

Table 1: Effect of spring concentrate supplement level on milk yield and body condition.

Daily meal fed (11 weeks Feb to April)	0kg	3kg	6kg
Milk kg total	1,953	2,082	2,303
Weight loss/gain	-39kg	+8kg	+7kg
Corrected for weight loss			
Milk response to first 3kg	-	1.3 to 1.5	-
Milk response to 3-6kg	-	-	0.9 to 1.0
Body condition at breeding	2.53	2.70	2.72
Daily milk (carryover period)	20.7*	22.2	21.8

* Lower yield than either the 3kg or 6kg supplementation rate.

Lameness – around calving time

This month we continue our focus on lameness with Waterford-based Ned Dunphy, Farm Relief Services and veterinary surgeon Ger Cusack of Comeragh Veterinary Practice. After calving, they recommend the following two actions:

1. Check mobility score regularly to identify lame cows that require treatment/trimming early. Early treatment is key to recovery.
2. Record cases of lameness in your herd. If you do not know what the level of lameness is, you will not be able to monitor



Treating lameness early is key.

improvements. Record each case of lameness and the cause (e.g., Mortellaro, white line disease). Your hoof trimmer/vet can help you with this.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Keep organised to keep safe



Work organisation is crucial in March when the workload peaks. Isolate cows when treating their calves. A 'bawl' from the calf can cause the cow to charge with the force of a juggernaut.

Workload occurs around the clock and staying organised is crucial. Keep the workplace tidy to prevent trips and falls, use equipment in a safe manner, and take the weight off your shoulders by using equipment such as wheeled devices. Have protective equipment such as gloves and disinfectant at the ready to prevent infection.

Self care is vital at this time of year. Getting adequate rest is essential to prevent becoming overtired. Plan and organise meals in advance to



Beware of cow attack.

prevent snacking and poor diet. Overall, your alertness and behaviour can prevent injuries and ill health at this busy time.