

Act now if fodder is tight

A fodder budget will help you make better and more timely decisions

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While there is a lot of uncertainty this year from factors outside our control, there is one thing that is certain – having enough fodder for your own stock is critically important.

An analysis of Profit Monitor data by George Ramsbottom gives a snapshot of where farmers are from a purchased fodder point of view. From a sample of 739 farmers, an average 3% of the total forage DM required per cow was bought in.

This group is stocked on average at 2.33 LU/ha overall and utilising 10.01t of grass DM/ha. So on average, the vast majority of farmers are able to grow nearly all their fodder requirements. This assumes they continue to utilise 10t grass DM/ha, equating to 12.5t DM/ha grown.

Any reduction in the annual growth on the farm from a weather event or significant reductions in fertiliser applications may decrease the annual growth figures. This will leave some farmers having to purchase additional fodder.

Of the farmers sampled, 177 or 24% purchased up to 10% of their total forage requirement per cow. So there is a significant proportion of farmers who purchase large amounts of fodder each year.

Next steps:

1 Complete a fodder budget. At this stage, first-cut silage should be



Martin Bennett and Bryan Donnelly.

made and you can estimate how much extra fodder is required on your farm.

2 Maximise the amount of fodder you grow. Silage will be expensive to make in 2022 – probably €200+/t/DM. Reducing fertiliser will save money in the short-term but will reduce the yield, making the silage dearer as harvesting costs per tonne will increase.

3 Minimise waste. In some silage clamps, up to 20% can be lost from poor conservation and bad pit face management. You wouldn't allow 20% of purchased concentrates or fertiliser to go to waste. Silage on your farm is an expensive commodity, don't waste it.

4 If you purchase fodder every year, make sure you have it secured.

Table 1: Analysis of Profit Monitor data.

	MS (kg/cow) / no. of cows	Purch. conc. (tons/cows)	Bought in forage (kg DM/cow)	St. rate (MP St. rate)	Grass used (grown) (t DM/ha)
Average (n=739 farms)	492/166	1.05 (17% of diet DM)	138 (3% of forage DM)	2.33 (2.99)	10.1 (12.5)
Farms buying in no forage (n=321 farms)	486/160	1.01 (16% of diet DM)	0 (0% of forage DM)	2.21 (2.89)	9.84 (12.3)
Farms buying in <200kg DM/cow (n=241 farms)	492/173	1.02 (16% of diet DM)	98 (2.2% of forage DM)	2.39 (3.01)	10.43 (13.0)
Farms buying in >200kg DM/cow (n=177 farms)	501/171	1.15 (18% of diet DM)	443 (9.8% of forage DM)	2.47 (3.13)	9.75 (12.2)

Buying silage on the open market may be difficult. With the uncertainty around fertiliser supplies, farmers are likely to carry surplus silage into 2023.

5 Check your stocking rate. Are you carrying too much stock? Reducing your stock numbers can have a dramatic impact on your fodder supply, if it's short. Reducing your numbers earlier in the year will save their fodder requirement for the winter and also reduce your stocking rate mid-season. This will allow you to conserve more silage. A cow sold in April will save you 25t of fresh silage compared to a cow sold in September, which will only save 12.5t of fresh silage.

6 Target low performing animals. High SCC cows, lame or poor performers should be culled early to allow the farm to build fodder.

7 If your farm is overstocked and always having to purchase fodder annually, look at the net revenue from these cows with your advisor. Could fewer cows be as profitable? Farms that rely on purchased fodder, concentrates and fertiliser are more exposed to the increase in these costs.

8 Will there be as many alternatives like whole crop, beet etc, available to purchase? It's hard to predict avail-

How PastureBase Ireland can help

Farmers are increasingly conscious of the importance and peace of mind of having adequate levels of fodder on farm. In 2018, a cold and wet spring delayed growth, followed by a summer drought that stopped grass growth.

A winter fodder budget feature is available to all farmers on PastureBase Ireland (www.pbi.ie) under the budgets option.

The following is required to complete a winter fodder budget;

- Number of livestock that will be housed over the winter (dairy cows, 0 to one year old, one to two year old suckler cows etc).
- Estimated length of the housed period.
- Volume of silage/maize/wholecrop pits (length, width, height).
- Number of bales (silage, hay, straw).
- Yield of winter grazing crops (kale, rape, extended grazing).

On the right is a summary of the fodder report for the Bennett's farm. The total fodder requirement for all the livestock on the farm is 524.5t of dry

matter (DM), while total fodder in stock equates to 571.6t of DM. This results in a surplus of 47t of DM or 9%.

Total required t/DM	524.54
Total in stock t/DM	571.65
Surplus/ deficit t/DM	47.1
% required in stock	109
Days short	0

There is sufficient feed on the Bennett's farm. With 9% extra fodder in the yard, this is a good contingency to have built up and can be very beneficial if a weather effect occurs in the near future.

On other farms, there may well be a deficit and decisions need to be undertaken – for example, purchase additional fodder or reduce the number of livestock for the winter period.

If you would like more information or help completing a farm budget, contact your local Teagasc advisor or the PBI Help Desk on support@pbi.ie or 046-920 0965.

–Micheal O'Leary

ability, as higher prices than previous years are inevitable.

In summary, farmers need to complete a fodder budget early and more importantly, react to any potential

fodder shortage on your farm as early as possible. Leaving it too late will reduce your options and could have a significant impact on your farm business.

Farmer profile

Martin Bennett milks 140 spring-calving cows in partnership with his parents Michael and Aileen in Hophall, Portlaoise, Co Laois. Their land includes a 50ha milking platform plus 38ha in outblocks nearby.

"Our stocking rate is reasonably high, as we have 140 0-1s, 140 1-2s (including 30-40 replacement heifers each year) as well as the cows," says Martin.

"We run a calf-to-beef system, with cattle finishing in the second winter. Usually, 100-110 cattle finish each year, made up of 70 Friesian/Angus bullocks and 40 Aberdeen Angus heifers.

"Our focus is on grassland management. The aim is to keep grass in diet for as many days as possible," he says.

To achieve this, Martin walks the farm regularly, recording more than 20 times each year – this allows him to graze paddocks at the perfect cover.

Martin says that as he has increased his efforts in grassland management over recent years, the farm's dry matter production (currently around 15t DM/ha) has increased for roughly the same level (200kg/N/ha) of fertiliser.

"We use the spring and autumn rotation planners to budget grass," he says.

"The fodder budget feature is an important tool within the PastureBase app. We focus on cutting 70ac of top-quality first-cut silage in May and a second cut of about 50ac in July. Also, 600 round bales are made. We feed 1.1t concentrates fed per cow," Martin concludes.

–Bryan Donnelly.

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