

MESSAGES:

- ▶ **'Never mind the B#ll#cks, here's the Science'**
- ▶ **Use meal, judiciously, to get you through March.**
- ▶ **Plan the end of your 1st rotation to grow 1.3 tons (DM/ha) more grass.**
- ▶ **P + S with Nitrogen in March 48 per cent more grass.**
- ▶ **Dos and don'ts of March grazing.**
- ▶ **You MUST use Gene Ireland Bulls.**
- ▶ **You must DNA test all heifer calves.**
- ▶ **Bulling Heifer management = compact calving.**
- ▶ **Let out calves and bulling heifers now.**

By Matt Ryan

'Never Mind the B#ll#cks, here's the Science'

- ▶ This is the title of a book by Professor Luke O'Neill, who is one of the leading voices of authority during the Covid-19 pandemic; in this book he grapples with life's biggest questions and tell us what science has to say about them: "This book is about celebrating science and hard facts on medicine in a time of fake news and sometimes unhelpful group think." Its relevance cannot

be lost to farming. This is a very important statement. In case you think 'fake news' is confined to Trump and Brexit campaigns, it is rife in medicine and agriculture plus aspects associated with farming. You are all aware of the off-farm 'fake news' campaigns being waged on some of the below topics:

- ▶ Animal food for human consumption
 - ▶ The treatment of animals' both on and off farm
 - ▶ Farmers as chief polluters of the environment
 - ▶ Methane from animal's causing serious global warming,
 - ▶ Getting bigger is selfish
 - ▶ Dairy farmers are the bane of rural Ireland,
 - ▶ All dairy farmers are millionaires
 - ▶ This breed or that is better
 - ▶ Stock bulls are better than AI
 - ▶ Protected urea doesn't work
- ▶ I depend totally on Teagasc and international research, verified and adopted by innovative farmers. Remember private companies and sales people have Indices to enhance selling a product; farmers need independent and reliable Indices to buy a producer. The very nature of the business dairy farmers are in predisposes that they must adopt new practices. But why has the adoption of certain recommended practices, such as improved soil fertility,



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grass measurement, moderate stocking rates, moderate use of meal feeding, EBI, cow fertility, been so slow? I believe many farmers are being influenced by false information either from farmers, sales people or other family members.

Meals to Cows in March?

- ▶ The quantity of meal to feed per day depends on grass availability for the imposed stocking rate. Meal is expensive this spring, so let us see if we can reduce the quantity fed. The message is 2 kgs, if you have enough grass and in fact there is too much grass on most farms.
- ▶ Let's make the case for grass, again?
 - ▶ Meal is very expensive as it costs over 28 - 32 cents per Kg dry matter (DM) compared with grass at 6 -7 cents.
 - ▶ And silage costs 15-19 cents per Kg DM, as well as depressing milk yield, % protein and cow body condition.
 - ▶ Grass has over 20 per cent Protein (silage has 8-10 per cent); grass now is over 78 per cent DMD with an intake of 2.5 per cent, approx, of body weight (silage at best is 70 per cent DMP with an intake of 1.8 per cent of body weight). Therefore, grass is a great feed.
 - ▶ With significant quantities of grass in the diet the cows' total intake increases by 3 per cent, she produces more milk, more protein (+0.3 per cent) and gains more weight (0.17 Kg extra per day).
- ▶ Compare the cost/day of feeding a cow on various options:
 - ▶ 9kgs Silage + 4 kgs Meal = €2.82 (1)
 - ▶ 9 kgs grass + 4 kgs Meal = €1.86 (2)
 - ▶ 11 kgs grass + 2 kg Meal = €1.37 (3)

Multiply these costs by say 100 cows and the daily savings by going from 1 to 2, 1 to 3 and 2 to 3 are €96, €145 and €49 respectively. Therefore, it is worth making a plan, however late, to make these savings and the increased benefits of providing more grass in the cows' diet.

- ▶ A grass budget plan, easily done on PastureBase, will guide you through the next 2 months so that you minimise meal feeding and get to the 1st week of April before starting the 2nd round while at the same time being in a position to go on a stocking rate of 4.0 to 4.5 from mid-April onwards.
- ▶ Of course, if you have not enough of grass each day to

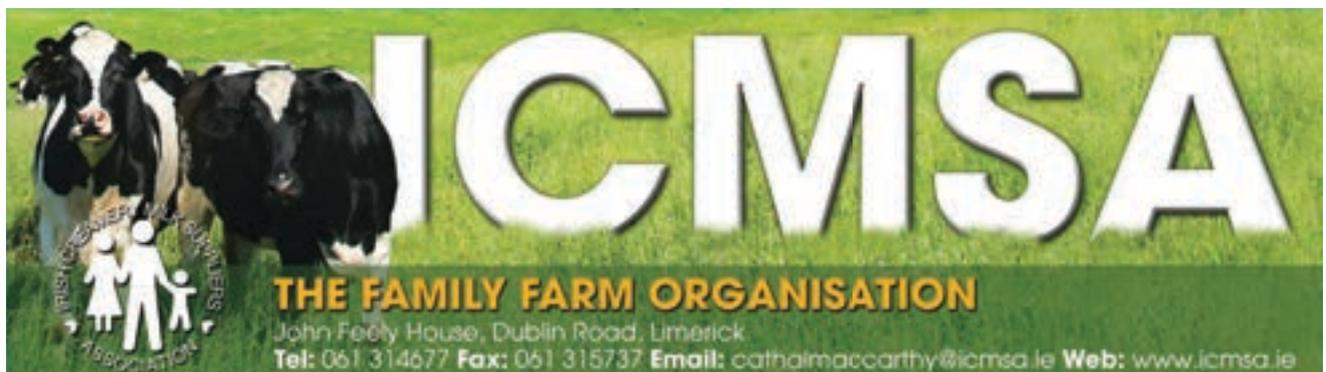
get you to the first week of April before starting the second rotation, that you should feed extra meals.

- ▶ Which type of meal? Obviously as cheap as possible, but good in energy with 12-14 per cent protein. I am a big fan of molassed beet pulp and with grass you can feed up to 3kgs/cow/day. Straight barley at similar levels could be fed but pulp would increase % F and P by 5% and 2% but decrease yield by 1% over barley. With these straights you will need to make provision for feeding magnesium to prevent grass tetany. Co-ops should be more responsible in making a value for money meal (12-14%P) with magnesium included available to farmer so that they do not have to feed more than 2-3 kgs meal per day to get the full complement of magnesium into cows. There is no need for high % protein rations when grass has 20-25% P in it.

End 1st Rotation 1st April

This is crucial to maximising grass in the cow's diet and setting up the farm for the remainder of the grass year.

- ▶ Finish on the 1st April in the South and dryer soils and 7-14 days later in the remainder of the country and wetter soils.
- ▶ You might be tight in grass in early April but you can and should increase meal level to slow down rotation length. Easy justified because you have saved on meals in late Feb and March by eating up all the grass that was available.
- ▶ Late let out this year due to weather will make things more challenging, but you must endeavour to achieve the following targets. The Spring Rotation Planner will drive this.
 - ▶ It is essential to hit the following targets (7-14 days later on wet/cold farms):
 - ▶ 1st March: 35% of grazing area grazed
 - ▶ 15th March: 65% of grazing area grazed
 - ▶ 29th March: 95% to 100% of grazing area grazed
 - ▶ Allow 7-9 days later for these targets in Northern or wetter farms.
- ▶ Why? To have enough grass on the second rotation you need a long period of days from first grazing to second grazing because the growth rate is low.
 - ▶ Grazing off old grass stimulates growth, so you grow more per day.
 - ▶ By ending the 1st rotation a few days early it allows



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you go some way towards achieving “an extras grazing rotation” in the year which, according to Moorepark results in 1.3 tons of grass/ha more being grown in the year.

- ▶ If you have not achieved the above target percentages grazed ask yourself how can you rectify things? Some or a mix of the following options must be considered:
 - ▶ Graze off light covers so that you can graze some areas faster, because it takes longer to graze high covers.
 - ▶ The preferable thing to do is to graze twice a day with milkers as follows; milk at 7 am, let cows out to grass at 8.30 until 11am, house with no feed, milk at 3pm; let cows out at 4.30pm until 6.00pm, house overnight with no silage, having fed 1kg or no meals at each milking.
 - ▶ Let out dry cows or dry stock to bring you to the 33% target in early March – only necessary if you are away under targets on 25th February.
 - ▶ Feed no meals or silage for a few weeks so as to graze more area.
 - ▶ Keep the meal for feeding in April because there is a strong possibility that grass will be tight in April.
- ▶ This spring grazing rotation planner is available on PastureBase and is very easy to set-up. This planner is effectively a GPS type of line plan from which you must not deviate below. This may happen because you were unable to graze enough area in Feb due to weather or high covers. But you must “get back on line” immediately by doing as suggested above.
- ▶ The driver of this principle is post grazing height:
 - ▶ If cows are leaving too much grass behind on the day’s allocated area, it indicates they are getting too much meals or silage. Therefore, feed no silage and/ or you reduce the meals being fed.
 - ▶ If they are grazing too tight and have all the grass eaten after an hour or so, then you must increase the meals being fed.
- ▶ I can’t stress enough the importance of “on-off” grazing when ground conditions are marginal – the soil structure is terribly important to grow grass and store Carbon. Now, with reduced N this is key to growing grass.

You Must Do a Grass Budget

- ▶ More and more farmers are doing grass budgets on PastureBase. Why? It will tell you how much grass you can feed to each cow per day. This is based on:
 - ▶ The numbers of cows being fed grass, the areas available (=stocking rate), the growth rates, the average farm cover (AFC) now and when you want to increase the stocking rate in April to close for silage.
 - ▶ In nearly all the plans that I have done I find that with a 6-week calving pattern of 78-85 per cent and having grazed 30 per cent of milking platform by 1st March that you will have to feed 4-5 kgs meal during most of the month because you will only be able to allocate 6 – 11 kgs DM of grass.
 - ▶ Stocking rates, a function of the compactness of calving, are varying from 2 cows/ha at the beginning



Developing calves from the inside out

Maeve Regan,
Head of Ruminant Nutrition, Agritech

As new-born calves are born with undeveloped rumens, the main objective over the next few weeks and months is to implement an early feeding strategy geared towards rumen development.

Rumen development begins within the first few days/weeks after birth and is advanced by exposure to healthy bacteria from the environment and the consumption of solid feeds.

Therefore, it is vital to introduce a high energy/protein calf starter ration from approximately 3 days of age, with free access to fresh clean water and high-quality clean straw, offered above ground level to avoid contamination (no silage/haylage).

Importance of diet for early rumen development:



Rumen development at six weeks. When fed milk only (A) the rumen has no papillae and is white in colour, meaning there is little feed absorption possible. When fed milk and grain (C) the rumen at six weeks shows developed papillae and is dark in colour, allowing for significant feed absorption. Source: Penn State University

What is happening to dairy calves at grass?

Year on year, in the proceeding weeks after turnout to grass, cases of calves suffering from setbacks such as summer-scour syndrome or calf wasting symptoms have been reported.

Spring grass is very high in oils like CLA (conjugated linoleic acid), sugars and potentially nitrogen, and to a young undeveloped rumen, this can be hard to adjust to. In addition, low covers of grass also have very little fibre, which is a key substrate for good rumen health.

Ensuring greater rumen development in early life will help combat these issues, alongside practises such as, offering concentrates post-turnout, grazing slightly heavier covers and/or offering a fibre source at first to ease the transition.

For further calf rearing advice, contact your local Agritech sales advisor or visit www.agritech.ie



of March to 3.2 cows/ha at the end of month.

- ▶ At higher SR's you will have to feed 5-6kgs meal unless you want to run very low covers in April – this will result in silage cutting being delayed.
- ▶ You will need to have AFC's of 600 to 700 during the 1st and 2nd week of April.
- ▶ Recent podcasts from Teagasc are advising building silage reserves, "old hay is old gold" attitude, to counteract the increased frequencies of very wet weather and/or drought conditions.

March Levels of Nitrogen + P, K, S & Ca

Very little nitrogen was applied up to mid-February and later because of the terrible weather.

To comply with the Nitrogen requirement of 250kgs/ha, Teagasc advise that by 15th March it is recommended that you have used 56kgs/ha (45 units/acre) of Nitrogen, protected Urea, be applied to all the grazing area.

- ▶ This is lower than you may be used to doing,
- ▶ But if you have not that amount used, you should get out there immediately, otherwise, you will be short of grass in April.
- ▶ Follow Teagasc advice because you will not have grass if you don't follow the recommendations for your stocking rate.
- ▶ Slurry, using the LESS systems, will have to be used correctly to compensate for lower levels of Nitrogen:
- ▶ Every 1,000 gallons gives 8-9 units of Nitrogen.
- ▶ Apply 2,000-3,000 gallons per acre on 30-50 per cent of the farm, particularly, areas to be cut for silage.
- ▶ As soil compaction by wheels gives a big reduction in grass growth in subsequent rotations, you must carefully choose the method of spreading, the fields to spread and the type of weather.
- ▶ From what I have seen everyone should use the umbilical system to prevent poaching and using up valuable labour at a time when very busy. A big word

of warning; massive amounts of slurry/acre (5000 to 7000 gallons), which farmers are applying, will kill the worm population, thereby, depriving the soil of air and so the surface will get soggy and poach very easily.

- ▶ One-third of the farm should have got slurry (3000gallons/acre) in February, now another third should get it while the last third should get it from mid-March on. This will satisfy instead of 24 units of N.
- ▶ Lime or calcium are essential for:
- ▶ Freeing up other nutrients, particularly, nitrogen and phosphate
- ▶ Perennial ryegrass and clover growth.
- ▶ Grass palatability (lower DMD's).
- ▶ Therefore, we can save on Nitrogen and phosphate if we apply lime now and it is much cheaper.

If you have no P or K put on yet, apply 2 bags 10:10:20 for Index 1 soils and 3-4 bags for lower index soils. Also include Sulphur (S). The addition of P and S with the N will increase the grass growth response by 48 per cent and the recovery of N by 20 per cent.

Dos and Don'ts of Grazing

After all the advice farmers, in general, are very lax on using this information. It must be a fundamental requirement of every farmer that he does not damage soil structure on his farm. This year is one of the most challenging ever with a lot of grass on farms but ground conditions are working against grazing.

- ▶ Some Don'ts:
 - ▶ Don't let out or leave cows out if raining, wait till afternoon and bring them in when raining starts (they do too much walking and consequently poaching).
 - ▶ Don't give them access to large areas of ground (they do too much damage as they walk more).

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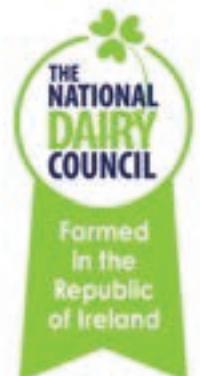
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- ▶ Don't let them out with "bellies" full (no silage if possible).
- ▶ Don't have dirty roadways or paddock entrances (they soil the grass).
- ▶ Don't let cows out at night if rain is forecast unless you are prepared to get up and bring them in.
- ▶ Don't leave calves 'suck' the cow for 3-4 days (because they do too much walking/bawling when let out).
- ▶ Don't ever go back to graze damaged, incompletely grazed paddocks until their next rotation slot (regrowths eaten off).
- ▶ Don't let out bulling cows (they do huge damage).
- ▶ Some Dos:
 - ▶ Do block graze to minimise walking/poaching damage.
 - ▶ Do have several paddock entrances.
 - ▶ Do walk cows over "good" grass to graze grass from the back of the paddock.
 - ▶ Do use "cow walks" to access long or awkward paddocks.
 - ▶ Do keep a close eye on your grass budget.

You Must Use Gene Ireland (GI) Bulls – Why?

- ▶ The 'team pack is higher in EBI (€310 compared to €255) than the average on the Active Bull List
- ▶ Ensures that you use them as teams (i.e., all bulls provided in equal amounts). Because, some farmers are using over 20-25 per cent of one bull on their farms.
- ▶ To encourage you there are attractive incentives, such as reduced rate semen charges and genotyping. Prices on these are currently being finalised.
- ▶ Access to the very best young bulls in the breeding program. These sires will provide the sons of interest for next year's program. So, herds using GI bulls will be the herds that semen companies target next year to purchase high EBI calves.
- ▶ You owe it to Ireland Inc. so that farmers' herd genetics can stay up with international competition.

Use Genomic Bulls (G1)

- ▶ The vast majority of the high EBI herds now are genotyping. That's no fluke as they are using the resultant data to pick better replacement females etc. This allows you mate your best cows, for sure, with the best AI bulls.
- ▶ There is evidence that farmers who have used G1's in the past have made faster genetic gain (EBI) than those not doing so.
- ▶ The cost of rearing a dairy herd replacement is approx. €1400. We need to be certain that we are rearing our highest EBI animals, especially with increased focus on stocking rates and decreasing carbon footprint, etc.
- ▶ It ensures 100 per cent parentage knowledge. Remember, parentage errors are 15 per cent on dairy farms and 25 per cent on large scale farms, that is calf and mother are not related.

- ▶ It is accelerating genetic gain through selecting the highest EBI animals from your cohort of young female calves. To maximise genetic gain, you must 'mate the best to the best'
- ▶ Using Sire Advice, the lowest EBI cows can get dairy beef or beef bulls, ensuring a calf of more value. Knowledge of the genetics of the cow is key.
- ▶ Donagh Berry, Moorepark, has calculated that the return on the investment is 4:1. That is, if it costs €22/animal, the pay-back will be €88/cow more profit.
- ▶ There is always the chance that you might with a mini-lotto and have a male that ends up in an AI station.

Graze Silage Ground in Early April

- ▶ There is a lot of silage left over on many farms this year. If you want to reduce meal costs then you should graze silage ground twice before closing. This practice saves on April meal bills. It will only delay silage cutting by a few days because growth rates will be over 90 in late May compared with 30 Kgs DM per day in early April.
- ▶ There will also be a strong possibility of split cuttings of 1st cut: facilitates the availability of aftergrass over a longer period.
- ▶ To push this concept to its limit the silage ground may be grazed from 15th-30th April. So, work backwards on your silage area to set this up. Silage will be cut on 10th-16th June.
- ▶ You must aim to get 90-95 per cent of all your silage requirements from the 1st cut. This will save money.
- ▶ Can only happen if cows are stocked at 4 to 4.5 cows per hectare on the grazing area during April-May. Stock cattle at 2,000-2,500 kgs weight per hectare.

Bulling Heifer Management = Compact Calving

- ▶ Bulling heifers (R2's) should now be 53 per cent of the breeds mature weight. Therefore, the range will be 275 kgs to 320 kgs for 520 kgs Jx and for 600 kg big Holsteins, respectively. Weigh them to confirm; be extra kind to animals below target and 'hard' on one far in excess of target.
- ▶ The median calving date for the national herd 12th March, which is far too late. It is resulting in huge loss of production – 60 to 100 Kg per cow of milk solids. The target is 18th and 26th February in the south and Northern areas, respectively. So, how can you bring it back near target?
- ▶ Bulling heifers are the solution because you can arrange their calving date. Therefore, they must calve before the cows every year. Remember, calving date slips 4-6 days per year, so an animal that calves on 1st March in her first year will calve on 6th March, 12th March etc. in subsequent years.
- ▶ Two things are now important to maximise the number of heifers that calve down in the first 3 weeks of calving next spring:
 - ▶ Adequate size, and
 - ▶ Synchronisation (discussed next month).
- ▶ Conception rates will be best if:

- ▶ They weigh 300-350 Kgs at AI date,
- ▶ They are on their 3rd heat at AI date,
- ▶ They are well used to the grass diet for 2 weeks before service.
- ▶ Manage animals accordingly to achieve these three objectives.
- ▶ Light yearlings for bulling may need meals now.
 - ▶ It will pay to get that extra 20-30 Kgs weight on.
 - ▶ But let them out and feed meals at grass (if small).
- ▶ Inject them for Leptospirosis again now, final injection before 5th April. This is a “must do” job for most herds.
- ▶ Stock them on grass at 1,000 Kgs weight per acre. Three to four per acre until June/ July. Equally, a copper bolus may be required if copper deficiency is a problem on your farm. Also address iodine where necessary.
- ▶ Let out worm dose is not necessary for these animals (or any yearlings). Why waste money?

Let Calves Out to Grass

- ▶ Calves at grass will thrive as well as those indoors and will have a lot less health problems while being easier to manage. I cannot understand why farmers are so slow in adopting this practice.
 - ▶ Try to have fresh grass for them every 3-5 days by rotating them round small blocks of grass.
 - ▶ Feed straw while at grass, as they need fibre (essential).

- ▶ If the weather is wet and cold, farmer’s favour letting calves run back into a house but this can be dangerous unless it is well ventilated like a hay barn.
- ▶ All they need outdoors is a dry lie and ground shelter because they spend

- a lot of time lying down.
- ▶ Fertiliser pallets and other homemade huts can be used to provide shelter and they work well.
- ▶ Continue feeding generous levels of meal (1 kg/day) and milk until weaning.

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