

October 2000

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Preparing swards for the next grazing season

The quantity and quality of grass on the farm in the spring is determined by management during the previous autumn.

Late autumn grass has lower digestibility and energy values than spring grass, but is still capable of producing weight gains of 0.6/0.7kg/day in growing stock .

On the other hand, gains of 1.0 kg/day or more can be obtained on good early spring grass. The aim must be to gear the system and management to accrue benefits at both ends of the grazing season. How is this done?

There are a number of important factors which influence grass cover across the farm in the spring, including:

Autumn closing date:

This has perhaps the greatest influence on spring turnout date and will vary greatly for different areas and land types within the province. However, for those planning to turn out cattle from mid-March, individual fields or paddocks should be closed off in succession and not re-grazed from around mid-October.

This protects regrowth of the sward and produces a 'wedge' of grass over the farm. If the aim is to graze the silage ground first in the spring, ensure that these are the first fields closed off.

Clean swards:

Swards should be grazed off as cleanly as possible in the last rotation. Good utilisation during the autumn period is facilitated by close topping during August / early-September.

Avoid poaching:

Severe poaching at this time of year results in sward damage and also compaction within the top few inches of the soil. Compacted soils grow little or no grass during the winter / early spring period.

In the autumn grass is best managed using a multi-paddock approach with a maximum of two to three day residence period in each paddock or field. In wet conditions, paddock size should be further reduced and stock should be moved on a daily basis. Always use a back fence to protect ground that has already been grazed.

If ground conditions become too wet to continue grazing, always be prepared to move stock to a sacrifice area, or perhaps the yard, for a day or two until grazing conditions improve.

Heavy Covers:

Building up very heavy grass covers in the autumn should be avoided if at all possible. If grass becomes too long the lower leaves begin to decay. This makes the sward more difficult to utilise and reduces the capability of the sward to grow during the winter period. A further negative effect of heavy covers is a reduction in tillering of the sward in spring, producing more open swards.

Sward Type:

Do not carry heavy grass covers over the winter on 'old' swards with a low perennial ryegrass content. This type of sward is more prone to disease and frost damage which results in leaf decay.

Producing and utilising grass in the late autumn / early spring periods requires a well planned system with attention to detail.

calcium, magnesium and phosphorus. Others such as copper, cobalt, iodine and selenium are required in very small amounts and are known as **trace elements**. Deficiencies are more often seen in growing animals as they have higher requirements than adults.

Mineral deficiencies vary between farms and are due to the different soil types. This will ultimately influence the mineral content of the pasture. The diet that animals are being fed will also influence their mineral status. With this in mind, supplements that are used on one farm may be inappropriate for use on another.

The mineral content of pasture varies widely with soil type and location. Acid soils tend to reduce the availability of all minerals to plants. Temporary pasture tends to be lower in minerals than permanent pasture, especially if they have been heavily fertilised and grass is lush. Mixed swards with clover have higher mineral content

A mineral imbalance is more common than pure deficiency. Excess of one element may interfere with the action of another for example, high molybdenum, sulphur or iron will interfere with copper metabolism.

Symptoms of imbalances may be vague for example, ill thrift or poor fertility and diagnosis on clinical signs is often very difficult as a result of this. Prevention can be achieved by providing correct mineral levels and avoiding excess supplementation. Contact your veterinary surgeon for details of how you can prevent mineral imbalances on your farm.

Minerals

Cattle require a dietary supply of at least 15 different minerals for proper growth and production. Those required in large amounts are known as **major minerals** and include

Final extensification – do your sums

The first four counts for the 2000 Extensification Premium Scheme are now past. Producers who hope to qualify for extensification payments should have had confirmation of the rolling average livestock units for the farm business to the end of August.

To qualify for extensification the average stocking rate must be under 1.6LU per hectare or not more than 2.0LU per hectare, depending on which rate of payment is being targeted.

With two counts still to take place – September / October and November / December, use stocking level predictions to calculate if the farm's stocking rate will be below the qualifying limits at the end of the year.

Remember that spring born calves, which have now reached six months of age, will be included in the remaining counts. Where farms are near the critical limits, correct management decisions must now be taken to ensure maximising returns from the various premium schemes, these include:

Finished beef cattle should be marketed as soon as possible

Do not hold onto cows which are to be culled

Plan the purchase of additional cattle to avoid breaching stocking limits

Where appropriate, use the 20% heifer rule for SCPS claims

Qualifying for extensification can be a significant source of income on many livestock farms. As a result, time spent checking figures and planning ahead now is time well spent.

Market opportunity for Hereford beef

Hereford beef is being successfully marketed throughout the world as a branded premium product. Waitrose, a supermarket chain in England, is currently marketing 140 animals per week offering a financial premium to GB producers. This scheme has provided a blue print for the new scheme in Northern Ireland launched by the Hereford Society and WD Meats. The Livestock and Meat Commission and DARD have also given assistance.

WD Meats require 40 Hereford steers and heifers per week and are offering a price premium to obtain constant supplies. Animals will be slaughtered each Wednesday, and must be pre-booked to provide adequate time for verification by the Hereford Society. To fulfill the requirements of the scheme all animals must be:

Sired by a registered pedigree Hereford bull (natural service or AI)

Farm Quality Assured

250kg minimum carcass weight for steers

230kg minimum carcass weight for heifers

E,U,R or O grades

For the successful uptake of this scheme, and to avail of the price premiums on offer, it is important that all primary producers supply a constant number of verifiable Hereford cattle.

If you have any queries please contact:

Ciaran Clancy (WD Meats) (028 7035 0500)

Robin Irvine (Hereford Society) (078 1888 8877)

Dr. Lewis McClinton (AFDS) (Tel 028 9052 4325)

Holstein bull beef at Greenmount College

The demand for processing grade beef has increased due to the Over Thirty Months Scheme and depletion of beef reserves from intervention stores. The ending of the Calf Processing Scheme has provided an opportunity for farmers to rear Holstein bull calves in an intensive beef system which can meet this demand. At present 60 bull calves from the Greenmount dairy herd are being reared at the College in a partnership involving John Thompson's & Sons Ltd who are supplying feed and Foyle Meats who are providing a slaughtering and processing dimension.

This highly intensive system does not involve grazed grass or silage. Feed is the largest cost component and each bull will consume almost two tonnes of concentrate and 200-300kg of straw from weaning to slaughter. Ideally, calves should be fed concentrates ad libitum using a hopper in order to minimise digestive upsets. Fresh straw offered ad libitum is also crucial in preventing stomach upsets and bloat. It is critical that calves never run out of feed, straw or fresh water. Bulls are currently being marketed with carcass weights of 248kg at just under 12 months of age. The net margin this year will be £122 per animal, including Bull Beef Special Premium of £100. It is important therefore that Beef Special Premium can be claimed on all animals before embarking on this system.

Finishing store cattle this winter

Farmers buying store cattle for finishing this winter need to carefully calculate how much they can afford to pay for cattle. The following budget shows potential margins from finishing cattle of R conformation being fed concentrates and average quality silage (69D) over a 150 day period.

	Steers		Heifers
Purchase price (450 kg)	450	(400 kg)	350
Feed – Concentrates @ £125/t	84		66
Silage @ £12/t	45		45
Vet/sundry costs	10		10
Slaughter/transport costs	23		23
TOTAL COSTS	612		494
Sale price – Carcase (325 kg @ £1.66/kg)	540	(278kg @ £1.64/kg)	456
Slaughter premium(2001)	34		54
Beef Special Premium (2001)	85		-
Extensification	21		-
TOTAL RETURNS	680		510
Feeder's margin	68		-16
Bank interest	19		15
Net margin	49		-31

Net margin excludes overhead costs such as machinery running costs, electricity, and water. These budgets have been carried out using a carcass price of £1.66/kg for R3 cattle. Unless finished cattle prices show a considerable improvement this spring, which is unlikely, then those finishers currently paying prices of £1 per kg for steers will return low margins. The prices being paid for heifers of 95p/kg will result in a loss for beef finishers.

Carry out budgets before purchasing cattle this autumn as it is unlikely that the good returns made from cattle purchased in 1999 will be repeated.

Relative value of concentrates for beef cattle

Not all feedstuffs have the same energy and protein content nor are they used with the same efficiency by cattle, and therefore each has a different feeding value. A breakeven price for a range of ingredients based on feeding value has been determined through feeding trials at the Agricultural Research Institute, Hillsborough. The prices have been established relative to rolled barley at £90/tonne and soya bean meal at £175/tonne. This means that the feedstuffs listed in this article are good value if purchased at less than the value quoted. The relative values can be recalculated as the prices of barley and soya change using the Relative Feed Table programme on the Greenmount web site www.greenmount.ac.uk.

Ingredient	Breakeven price (£) per tonne	Comments
Wheat	90	Finely ground wheat can cause digestive upsets
Maize	103-113	Has a higher energy content than barley and is also used more efficiently by cattle
Maize gluten feed	99-107	A suitable feed for store cattle
Maize germ meal	92	Has a high oil content
Citrus pulp	77	Can encourage feed intake and help prevent the onset of digestive upsets
Sugarbeet pulp (molassed)	84	Similar effects to citrus pulp
Molasses	57	Effective energy value decreases at high feeding levels
Soya bean meal (Hipro soya)	175	High quality vegetable protein source
Cottonseed cake	131	A suitable feed for stores but not for finishing cattle
Dark distiller's grains	129	Has relatively high protein and energy contents
Sunflower meal	110	A suitable feed for stores but not for finishing cattle
Rapeseed meal	147	Can partially or completely replace soyabean meal

Maize gluten, citrus pulp, rapeseed meal and maize dark distiller's grains are good value at present.

EBV's help in selecting the right bull for your herd

If you are planning to buy a bull this autumn, how do you select the right one for your herd? Selecting a bull to improve your herd on looks alone is almost impossible. By using Estimated Breeding Values (EBVs) to assess potential performance, the purchase of a bull whose progeny will suit your needs can be ensured.

Bulls may be selected for a range of purposes including;

- To mate with heifers
- To produce replacements
- To improve carcass quality
- To produce fast growing calves

So what should you be looking for? – EBV's explained

EBVs explained

Calving Value (CV) – the overall assessment of an animal's effect on calving. This rates bulls in terms of their effect on their progeny's calving, and is a combination of EBVs for gestation length and calving ease. A higher Calving Value is associated with a shorter gestation length and an easier calving.

Maternal – 200 day milk (kg liveweight) – estimates how much of the performance of the calf up to 200 days (weaning) is due to the dam's maternal performance, for example, milkiness, uterine capacity and general mothering ability. Higher positive 200 day milk EBV's indicate higher milk yields and better maternal ability.

Beef Value (BV) – an assessment of the economic genetic merit of an animal to produce a carcass demanded by the market in terms of weight, conformation and fat composition. The more positive the Beef Value, the better the carcass meets current market demands.

As well as looking at these three main components, individual EBVs should be looked at.

200 day, 400 day growth – higher positive values indicate faster growth

Muscle score and muscle depth – a visual and ultrasonic measurement of an animal's muscling at 400 days. A higher positive value indicates more muscling.

Fat depth – is measured ultrasonically at 400 days. A higher negative figure indicates a leaner carcass.

Accuracy – reflects the amount of information used. The higher the accuracy, the lower the chance of the EBV changing with new data.

Remember that half the genes come from the sire and half from the dam, so a bull's EBVs must be halved to estimate the genetic potential of the calf. Also EBVs can't be compared across breeds.

Obtain a catalogue in advance of the bull sales and select a group of bulls which meet your criteria on performance. At the sale, select the one on your short list which is correct and whose looks and style meet with your approval and will improve your herd.

