

Autumn Grazing Management

There is a lot of potential to make better use of grass on farms in autumn. Every extra tonne of grass utilised is worth €181/ha to a dairy farm while €105/ha to a dry stock farm. Utilising extra grass and lengthening the grazing season should be your key objective in autumn. The focus of autumn grazing management is to increase the number of days at grass and animal performance, but also to set the farm up during the final rotation to grow grass over winter and provide grass the following spring.

There are two key autumn periods:

1. Period of autumn grass build-up.
2. Managing the final rotation

Generally, rotation length should be extended from 1st August. The focus of this period is to gradually build pre-grazing herbage mass, targeting maximum covers of 2,000kg to 2,300kg DM/ha in mid-September.

Pre-grazing covers greater than 2,500kg DM/ha are difficult to utilise and should be harvested as surplus (round bales). Surplus paddocks should be removed in August. Removing paddocks after the first week of September should be avoided, if possible; a September harvest is too late as paddocks do not have enough time to re-grow to make any contribution in the last rotation. By achieving the right farm cover at the right time, decisions are easier to make. Many farmers fall into the trap of building cover too late and are pushed into harvesting excess grass in September.

The aim of this period is to maximise the amount of grass utilised from September to December while, at the same time, finish the grazing season with the desired farm grass cover.

The farm grass covers or amount of grass grown over this period will depend on stocking rate, level of supplementation, autumn nitrogen and system of production. The following guidelines should be used:

- Rotation length should be increased from 25 to 30 days in mid/ late August to 35 to 40 days in late September.
- Grazing rotation should be 30 to 40 days with first fields rested from 10th to 15th October.
- Closing should be a week to 10 days earlier on heavier type soils.
- Choose drier fields, fields close to the yard or sheltered fields to close first so that they will be the first ones grazed in spring.
- Close wettest paddocks next in the rotation followed by the remaining paddocks.
- Aim to have 60% of the farm grazed by the first week of November with the remaining 40% grazed by early December (these dates change, depending on location).
- Aim for an average farm cover of 7cm to 8cm (1,000kg DM/ha) by late September.

- Pre-grazing yields should not exceed 2,000kg to 2,300kg DM/ha and should be adjusted downward for wetter type soils.
- Very high pre-grazing yields will result in poor pasture quality and poor utilisation by the grazing animals.
- Avoid grazing very large pre-grazing yields in last rotation (>2,500kg DM/ha). As well as the problems outlined above, high pre-grazing yields in the last rotation have been shown to have a very detrimental effect on subsequent winter/spring grass growth.
- Pastures should be grazed well in the last rotation to encourage autumn/winter tillering. Aim for a residual of 3.5cm in fields as they are closed.
- Use younger or lighter animals or dry cows to achieve this residual in wetter conditions.
- Closing grass cover in early December should be, on average, 650kg DM/ha.

Feeding the Dairy Cow in autumn

The main aim during this period is to maximise the amount of grazed grass in the dairy cow's diet. However, there are occasions when supplementation may be necessary such as:

- To reduce demand for grass so that covers can be built helping to extend the grazing season.
- To maintain milk lactose levels.
- To maintain milk production. Milk price will have a large influence over this.
- To increase cow BCS before drying off.

If grazing full-time, 2kg to 3kg DM of a high energy low-protein concentrate is sufficient. If cows are indoors on grass silage (68 DMD to 70 DMD) 3kg to 4kg DM of an 18% crude protein concentrate will support 10 to 12 litres of milk (0.8kg to 1.1kg milk solids).

Sheep

- Grass year starts in autumn.
- Closing from late October.
- Swards should be rested for 120 days over winter.
- Match autumn closing dates to expected lambing dates to match spring grass supply to demand.

Autumn targets for an early March lambing flock, ensuring a 120-day rest period over winter. Critical to autumn management is managing stocking rate. Grass will disappear quickly at high stocking rates so managing the number of lambs to be carried over the winter and into next spring is a vital tool to manage grass during the autumn. If late spring-born lambs have reached optimum weight for factory or butcher they should be drafted immediately and this will reduce the competition for those lambs that remain and optimise the product for the consumer.

Shorter days will see grass growth rates start to drop off in autumn but with silage ground coming back into the grazing platform, this will help to extend grazing rotations. Final application of nitrogen should be applied in early September.

Beef

Grazing rotations should be increased by one or two days per week depending on the farm's ability to carry cattle into late autumn. Where possible, keep moving cattle into paddocks at a sward height of 10cm to 12cm. Forward cattle or weanlings may benefit from 2kg to 3kg per day of concentrates for a short period prior to sale. This will also reduce grazing demand if you are running tight on grass.

Spring born weanlings can be forward grazed ahead of sucklers cows. This will ensure they receive the best quantity grass at a time when the milk yield of the cow is low.

Ground conditions can become harder to manage in late autumn so avoid any potential poaching if ground becomes wet. As cattle enter October, thoughts should be turning to closing up paddocks for spring turnout. On heavy farms, start to close up paddocks from mid September.

Each paddock should be grazed out completely before closing up for the winter. Try and close up paddocks in the order that they will mostly be grazed by next spring.