DN NEWSLETTER issue 47

Grass is the cheapest source of feed on our farms but do we take as much time and effort over it as we do other feeds? Measuring and monitoring is key to optimising utilisation. Planning will help us make more from this available resource.

Preparation for Grazing
We can all profit better from better grassland utilisation. Grazed grass is the cheapest feed on most farms if it is properly utilised. This newsletter aims to give you some thoughts ready for this season's grazing.

Sward Assessment
Fields should be walked at least once a week from early February until early December to allow sward growth to be monitored carefully. Decisions can then be made as to whether a field is ready for grazing or whether it should be closed to allow re-growth.

Pasture walking enables an assessment of field cover, which is the total supply of pasture dry matter available for grazing. Both the sward height and density should be assessed.

If there is a high proportion of clover, there will be more herbage than with a similar height of a ryegrass-only sward. A five-grade scale is used to rank the amount of cover for cattle:

Grade 1 = heel height on a wellington boot, 1500kg DM/ha, post graze target, 4-5cm high

Grade 2 = ankle height, 2000kg DM/ha

Grade 3 = 2500kg DM/ha

Grade 4 = mid wellington boot, 3000kg DM/ha, pre-graze target, ryegrass has three, fresh leaves

Grade 5 = 3500kg DM/ha

Three-Leaf System:
Uses the emergence of ryegrass leaves as an estimate of plant productivity and maturity. A ryegrass tiller usually supports three green leaves.

Leaf 1 (the youngest) is green and growing at the top of the tiller

Leaves 2 and 3 are no longer growing but still green

Leaf 4 is dead and decaying

Grazing ryegrass when it has less than two fresh leaves reduces the vigour of the plant and subsequent re-growth. Grazing with more than three leaves reduces sward productivity as leaf death and decay has already started and the lower leaves may be shaded. In mixed swards, clover will suffer first from this shading, reducing the density of the overall re-growth.

Quality will be compromised by dead and decaying leaves and fibre levels will rise. Grazing less than 4cm compromises re-growth as the tillers have little or no green leaf area with which to capture sunlight. Leaving more than 5cm in a sward result in lower production. Pasture wastage is greater at higher sward heights, and this results in lower utilisation and efficiency. Overall sward quality is reduced with low quality stubble accumulating at the base of the plant.

Managing Grazing

Throughout the grazing season there are many challenges with rapidly changing sward growth rates, pasture quality and cow requirements. Close monitoring is key to coping with the unpredictability associated with grazing. Adjusting the grazing rotation length is essential to keep on top of swards that can grow twice as fast one month as the next.

Prior to turnout it is important to prepare well and ideally a gradual transition to grazing over 2-3 weeks will minimise the effects of the change in diet. At turnout the average farm cover should be 1900-2000kg DM/ha. It is important to decide which fields will be grazed first. Tracks, fences, gates, water troughs and pipes should be checked they are in good condition. Electric fencing should be checked to make sure it is working well.

Sugars are at their highest levels in the grass and their balance with nitrogen is optimal in the afternoon so turning into a new pasture in the afternoon will increase intakes and could potentially increase milk production.

As growth rates slow in the summer, pastures will take longer to re-grow and so rotation length will need to be extended which may mean bringing more fields into the grazing cycle. Alternatively, any shortfall can be met by buffer feeding and supplementation.

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Planning Grazing

Flexibility is key. The prime purpose of grazing is to present cows with a consistent supply of quality forage. Temporary electric fencing allows fields to be subdivided into more appropriately sized areas with complete flexibility. Grass production is maximised by protecting re-growth immediately after grazing. Allocations can be changed to match cows' requirements and grass growth.

Field Access:

- Consider ways of accessing all fields by making small changes to existing roadways
- Open larger areas of farm by replacing permanent fences with temporary electric ones
- Put side roads or tracks of one main thoroughfare
- Improve efficiency of grazing any area by changing entry point
- Improve efficiency of fields by providing separate entry and exit points
- Make small changes to collection and dispersal areas
- Use temporary hoses and troughs to provide water to areas where water is restricted
- Consider whether roadways need to be used by both cows and tractors
- Use electric fencing to run a 3-metre edge to avoid damage to un-grazed sward if must pass through a field
- Avoid gateways getting muddy and dangerous
- Avoid land becoming so wet that walking over it damages the sward or soil structure

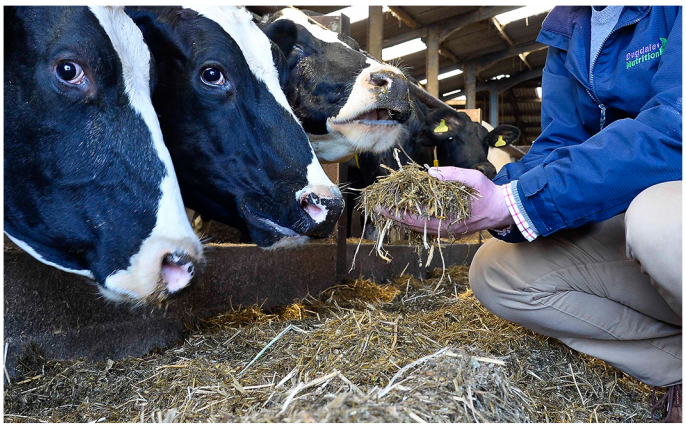
Good cow tracks:

- Reduce lameness and mastitis
- Limit poaching and sward spoilage
- Speed up stock movement
- Improve udder cleanliness
- Minimise walking stress and foot problems
- Shorten winters (give longer field access)

Different grass types provide different benefits so it is worth discussing with someone what will work best for your category of livestock and soil types.

Supplementing Grazing

Supplementing grazing has two main roles, overcoming seasonal grazing shortages and increasing the nutrient density of grazed grass diets to sustain higher levels of milk output. Buffer forages or bulk feeds are preferable if grazing is short but if pasture supplies are adequate concentrate feeds are better for increasing nutrient density without compromising pasture intakes.

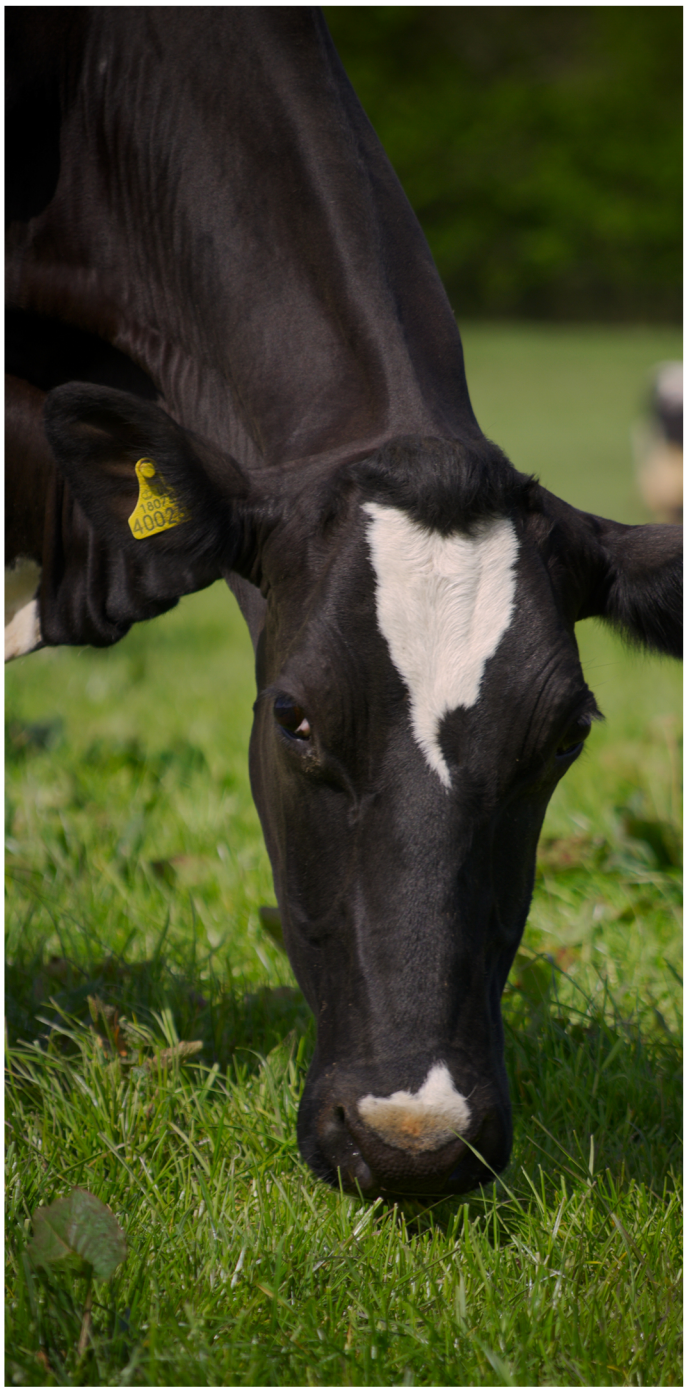


Forage supplements should be considered if the post-graze point in several fields is heading towards 4cm, there is a step down in cover from field to field, or average farm cover estimates are below 1800kg DM/ha. Forage buffers can be grass silage, maize silage, brewers or distillers' grains, whole crop cereals or straw.

Early lactation cows will show more benefit when fed a buffer than late lactation cows. Restricted access to buffer feeding is an effective way of providing supplementary forage while minimising the effect on grazing intake.

Concentrate feeding should be targeted at higher yielding cows. Starch, digestible fibre, and bypass protein are important in grazing concentrate feeds.

When considering your grazing this year plan ahead but be flexible. Do not hesitate to speak to your Dugdale Nutrition sales representative to discuss support, products and testing available to optimise your grazing performance this year.



Strategy	Annual Yield (t DM/ha)	Utilisation (%)	Usable Yield (t DM/ha)	Percentage Increase (%)
Set Stocking	6.0	50	4.3	
Continuous (variable)	8.5	60	5.1	20
Rotational	10.2	65	6.6	56
Paddock	10.2	80	8.2	92

For further information about products and services available from Dugdale Nutrition, please contact your local DN Sales Specialist or our Veterinary Technical Manager, Debby Brown, by emailing:

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If you are unsure of your local DN Sales Specialist, please visit the DN website, using the address below:

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