

More grass from better soil management

Stephen Hobbs, Bedfordshire

Stephen Hobbs is a member of the Dawn Meats Grazing Discussion Group based around their Cardington plant in Bedfordshire. The group received Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) funding in 2013 which pays for Liz Genever to facilitate their meetings.

Stephen's beef enterprise covers around 57ha (140 acres), of which 32ha (79 acres) is permanent pasture and parkland, 18ha (44 acres) improved leys and 7ha (17 acres) under maize. He applies around 50kg N per ha to some grazing land and nearly 130kg N per ha to the leys in spring. All the leys are mown for first cut and around 8ha (20 acres) for second cut.

He runs 60 spring-calving cows and breeds his own replacements to calve at two years old. He finishes all the cattle by 24 months at around 400kg deadweight (DW) for steers and 345kg DW for heifers.

He has previously waited until the end of April before turning out, but is contemplating trickling cows and calves out a bit earlier this spring, as the weather has been kinder on his heavy land. However he is apprehensive of colder weather returning, so doesn't want to turn everything out yet. He has zoned his farm into silage and grazing ground, as it can be challenging to have enough grazing grass in the spring.



Testing the soil

Soil samples were collected as part of the discussion group activity, from the silage fields in February 2014. They showed that an investment in Fibrophos (burned poultry litter) in the past few years has produced near perfect soil indices and the nutrient requirements have been subsequently reduced.

Field name	pH	Phosphate Index (mg/l)	Potash Index (mg/l)	Magnesium Index (mg/l)
Silage field 1	6.3	2 (17.4)	2- (139)	4 (178)
Silage field 2	6.7	2 (17.8)	1 (114)	3 (165)

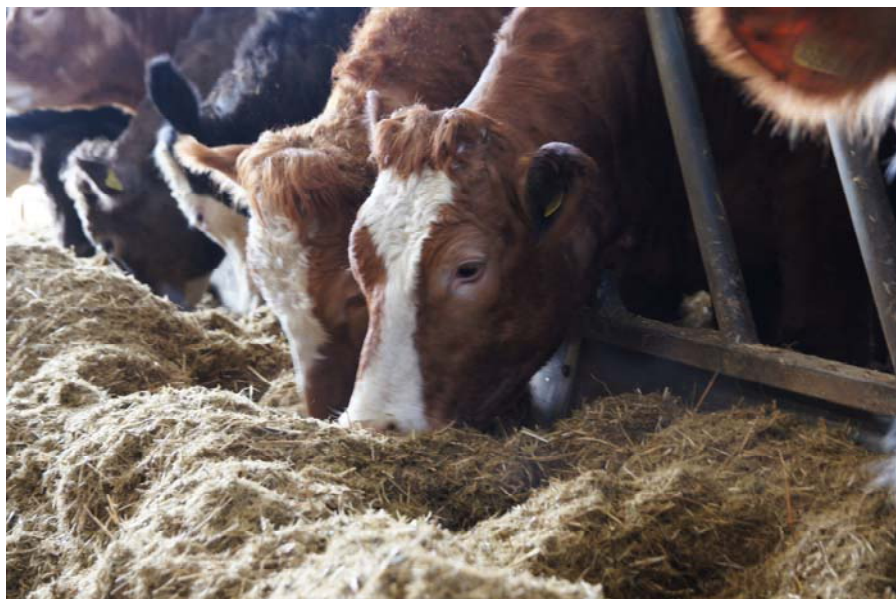
Soil samples were also taken from the grazing land, and showed that there was more variation and some investment in lime and phosphate would be beneficial.

Field name	pH	Phosphate Index (mg/l)	Potash Index (mg/l)	Magnesium Index (mg/l)
Grazing field 1	5.8	0 (5.2)	1 (97)	3 (134)
Grazing field 2	7.8	3 (36.2)	3 (264)	3 (142)

Physical soil conditions

Stephen has previously identified surface compaction as an issue on some ground that is cut and grazed, so he used an aerator in mid-March to help deal with this.

He is also interested in improving deeper drainage and contemplating mole ploughing on some of the fields that were tiled drained in the 1960s. He is intrigued by some of the work that is happening on deeper rooting crops to improve carbon capture and soil condition, such as clover, plantain, chicory and festuloliums, but feels that not all of them would be useful on his heavier ground.



Investment essential

Stephen feels that investing in both modern grass varieties and nutrients for his silage ground is important, as he wants to grow high quality, nutrient-responsive leys for silage.

Coming through the winter with plenty of feed left this year has also made him realise he can have more confidence in his home-grown forage, which may lead to less reliance on bought-in feed. Drawing up a winter feed plan before next year is top of his 'to do' list.

Further reading

More information can be found in the EBLEX BRP manuals, [Managing Nutrients for Better Returns](#) and [Improving Soils for Better Returns](#).