

## Managing grass for beef production

**Gareth Davies, independent grassland consultant**

The best messages are often the simple ones, so here is mine – if you want top quality cattle performance, feed top quality grass.

That may sound very straightforward and in theory it is. But achieving it, especially in late summer, is not as easy as at other times of the year.

This is in part due to the fact that grass growth always slows down in late summer, before having a little growth spurt in early autumn. This means that demand can quickly overtake growth, so even if animals are grazing quality grass, they may not be able to eat sufficient quantities to maintain good growth rates.

If they have been set-stocked on the same area of ground all summer, there could also be a high level of rejection around the manure and urine patches, which in effect means the grazing area is much smaller than the total field.

A saving grace for some farmers at this time of year is the fact they have silage ground available to graze and, as this has been cut throughout the season, the quality will be higher. If three cuts of silage are normally taken, it may be worth grazing after the second cut and making silage on the grazing ground (if this is practical). This will help sort out areas of rejection.



### Rotational grazing

The best solution to the problem is to run a rotational grazing paddock system. This will involve measuring grass growth out in the fields every week to gain an understanding of how much is growing and where it is. With this knowledge it is possible to make informed decisions when allocating grass to different classes of stock.

For example, if there is a feed demand for 30 kilograms of dry matter per day (30kg/DM/day) and you know that for the next three weeks the grass is likely to only grow at 20kg/DM/day, you can start building up grass covers in advance, allowing you to graze right through this 'tight' period.

### Measuring pays for itself many times over

Many farmers tell me that rotational grazing and measuring grass growth is a lot of extra work that they do not have time for in their hectic lives. Yet, in reality, it would probably be the best use of their time.

This is because they will undoubtedly grow higher quality grass on a regular basis and will certainly grow a lot more.

Producers I work with can grow 25 to 50 per cent more grass by spending some time measuring, planning and rotationally grazing their stock.

Putting this in perspective, if you could grow another two tonnes of dry matter per hectare per year (2t/DM/ha/year) on a 50ha farm, that would be an extra 100t/DM/year. Most farmers could achieve this in less than 100 hours work per year, so in effect one hour's work could yield 1t/DM. You decide if it's worth it!

### Small steps to start

Many beef farmers would see big benefits just by closing some gates! Instead of leaving cattle to roam over five or six fields, just 'locking' them in one field for four or five days before moving them on to the next one would make a difference. This is an easy way of seeing the benefits of rotational grazing even in its most basic form. Give it a try and see for yourself.