

Growing grass to grow profits

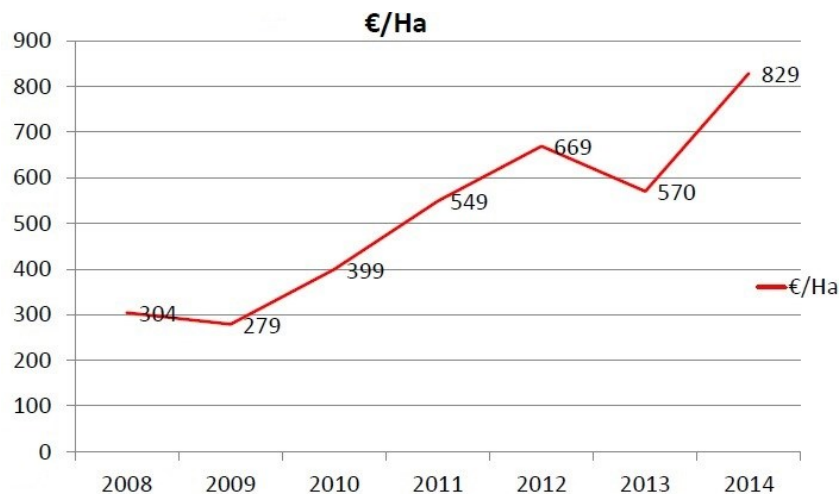
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The Teagasc and Irish Farmers Journal BETTER farm beef programme was established in 2009 as a joint industry programme. Currently, 31 demo farms are involved to ensure the different conditions across Ireland are considered.

The target for the BETTER farms is to achieve €1,000 gross margin per hectare and the chart below shows the progress.



The focus of the programme has been to encourage producers to think about the areas they can control such as the use of grass, kg of output, veterinary and replacement costs. The farmers are encouraged to move away from focussing on beef price, imports, price of fertiliser and meals, land availability and land rental costs.

There are four main areas to the programme – farm output and stocking rate, grassland management, breeding, genetics and fertility, and animal health. An advisory team produces a simple farm plan for each farm and progress is tracked.

In 2014 the average gross margin increased from €597 to €829, the highest gross margin being recorded by a bull beef producer at €1,471 and the lowest was €342 (weanling producer). Stocking rates were also higher which means higher output. The stats showed that weanling producers were most improved but the bull beef systems were still the most profitable.

Improving grassland management is a key area because there is massive potential and it provides Ireland's competitive advantage. However, there is a low level of uptake and interest, which is linked to the fact that it is easier to buy concentrates than manage grass.

Top ten tips for grass from BETTER Farm programme

1. Complete a whole farm soil analysis.
2. Address pH,P and K issues to increase fertiliser efficiency as soon as possible.
3. Get back to basics with paddocks and drinkers.
4. Walk the farm on a weekly basis to measure growth and feed budget .
5. Aim for 240 days+ at grass.
6. Spring grassland management starts in the autumn, no exceptions!
7. Young stock i.e. weanling heifers/bulls are turned out first with the aim of getting 1.25 kg of gain per day.
8. Apply slurry early in spring and on dull damp days.
9. Completely clean out in the first rotation.
10. Targeted reseeding of poor performing paddocks pays (at high stocking rates).

The farms participate in discussion groups in their local area so other farmers can also benefit from intense advisory service.

[Take a look at the Teagasc website for more information on the programme](#)

BETTER Farm Profile: Chris McCarthy, Co. Westmeath

Chris is a full-time tiling contractor and runs 55 suckler cows on 28 ha (70 acres). They calve in January to March, all weanlings are sold in the autumn and replacement heifers are purchased. He achieved a gross margin of €1,001/ha in 2014.



In 2009, his farm was divided in to eight paddocks, which increased to 17 by 2010. He's growing more quality grass, allowing calves to creep graze ahead and has extended the grazing season. He measures grass weekly, which means he can plan for grass scarcity or surplus. This also helps him identify underperforming paddocks for reseeding. Another advantage is that all stock is in one location, so it is quick for Chris to check them.

More information about growing grass take a look at the BRP manual on
[Improving pasture for Better Returns](#)