

Beef from Grass

Can all swards be rotationally grazed?

Lloyd and Peter Mortimore farm organically at Lizwell Farm, Widecombe on the Moor, in Dartmoor. The land rises to 305 metres above sea level and rainfall is steady. Soils are generally good and the pH is very well managed. The Mortimores hosted an on-farm Beef from Grass event on 1 June 2016.

Improvements

In an effort to begin improving sward quality, yield and utilisation as part of the Beef From Grass project, last autumn a 17 ha area consisting of approximately 1 ha fields bordering the open hill was selected in order to set up a rotational grazing platform. The land was chosen because it was for grazing only, required little investment in fencing and water was already available to be piped to the paddocks.



The swards were inspected on the 7 April 2016 and 800-1800kg dry matter (DM)/ha was recorded. Bearing in mind 1500kg DM/ha is the post-grazing target, it is fair to say growth this season was challenging.

However, by the 1 June there were 30 cows and their calves rotationally grazing each paddock for a period of two to three days, depending on the size of paddock. After the first rotation was completed, a number of observations were made:

All stock looked in good condition and in full milk but grazing was patchy and selective, with some grass species rejected by cattle as they were well in head. Poorer pastures dominated by docks, dandelions and daisies did not perform well and looked finished after the first grazing. However, older permanent pasture was doing well and paddocks reseeded four to five years ago were recovering the fastest. Areas of clover and ryegrass were excessively grazed and the Mortimores topped some paddocks to tidy them up.

There was plenty of discussion at the on-farm event in June and it was identified that grazing a diverse sward, especially an organic one, is a challenge and an alternative approach is needed. Topping paddocks after the cows have moved on is not the most efficient management technique, instead, mowing an area of paddock ahead of grazing would increase utilisation of the more stemmy grasses and reset the grazing height for the next rotation. It would also reduce the over-grazing of the better areas of the paddock and gradually change the species ranking of the swards.

Summary

Introducing a paddock system has identified the under-performing paddocks which are now targeted for reseeding. In the past, the system of open gateways didn't truly reflect the significant differences in quality. The stock would spend more time in the better fields which means nutrients were concentrated in these areas, creating a greater void between the better and worse performing areas.

All swards can be rotationally grazed, but the methodology needs tweaking when species diversity is high and nitrogen input is zero. Stocking rate and speed of pasture recovery is one area to look at, as is considering mowing before grazing. Using similar pastures across all paddocks would make things much easier. Application of manure is an important management tool, especially during early spring ahead of grazing. However, as is the case with many organic farms in the uplands, the Mortimores have a limited supply of manure which is allocated to the production of winter forage.

For more information on setting up a paddock rotation see the Better Returns Manual
[Planning Grazing Strategies for Better Returns](#)

To find out more about upcoming Beef from Grass events take a look at the
[AHDB Beef & Lamb website](#)