

Driving beef performance from grass

Grass is an important crop and can provide 85% and 95% of the energy requirements of English beef and sheep systems respectively. Yet it rarely earns the respect it deserves as a potentially high-quality, low-cost ruminant feed. Half of what is grown is commonly wasted.

Beef from Grass project

The AHDB Beef & Lamb-funded Beef from Grass project aims to highlight the potential of grass and forages for beef cattle production and provide practical guidance on how beef producers can improve their current grazing management.

Matthew House is one of the beef farmers involved in the project. He farms 195ha, which includes 40ha of wheat and 40ha of maize, on a contract-farming agreement. The remainder of the farm is grass, some of which is in an Entry Level Stewardship agreement. Matthew took over the farm in December 2014 and aims to build suckler cow numbers up to 300 by the spring of 2019. To make this achievable, he has had to focus on maximising grassland production and utilisation.



Since starting the project in October 2015, all of the grassland has been soil sampled and a full nutrient management plan has been produced by Charlie Morgan, who is one of the grassland consultants working on the project. Matthew has focused on applying the correct nutrients at the right time in order to correct any deficiencies within the soil. Charlie also advised that the fields should be split into smaller paddocks so that they could be rotationally grazed, which has meant a considerable increase in grassland utilisation (Table 1).

Table 1: A guide to expected utilisation according to different situations

| Situation | Expected utilisation (%) |
|--|--------------------------|
| Set stocking – Limited control over sward heights, grazing large areas for long periods, wet conditions | 50 |
| Continuous grazing or relaxed rotational grazing – Limited control over sward heights, grazing picky stock | 60 |
| Rotational grazing – Reasonable grazing pressure, good control over sward height | 65 |
| Paddock grazing – Frequent moves, good control over sward height | 80 |

In spring 2016, Matthew set up the farm boundary with a single strand of electric fencing and created 21, two hectare paddocks across the grazing platform where he successfully rotationally grazed 68 cows and calves. This has been helped by the use of a grass growth monitoring programme, which generates a growth and demand profile in kg/ha of dry matter. This has enabled Matthew to make better use of the grass, whether this is for grazing or conservation. Using a tool like this also allows the production of each paddock to be monitored and identification of those poor-performing paddocks in need of reseeding.



Cows and calves are weighed at regular intervals throughout the year to monitor performance. During the grazing season, the calves were growing at over 1kg per day, without any additional creep feed.

To reduce costs further, the cows have been out-wintered on a brassica crop with hay and straw placed in the field during the autumn. This has drastically reduced straw, labour and feed requirements and the crop will be strip grazed until the start of calving in March.

Matthew aims to reduce his costs further by:

- Continuing to reduce average mature cow weight within the herd so that stocking density can be increased, resulting in more weight of beef sold per hectare
- Introducing creep grazing to increase calf growth rates
- Investigating the feasibility of finishing some of the heifers off grass, rather than selling them as stores shortly after the end of the grazing season.

Further information on improving grassland management can be found in the BRP manual [Planning Grazing Strategies for Better Returns](#).

For further information and to keep track of the Beef from Grass project, take a look at [Grazing Club News](#) or follow #grazingclub on twitter.