

# Failure to Plan is Planning to Fail

All good pasture managers during the early autumn period should be focusing on getting their average pasture cover prepared for the spring. Here Justin Rees, Grassland Specialist for Genus ABS, explains why farmers should be planning now, to get grazing off to the best start next spring.

Meeting the average pasture cover target in the spring is more important than at any other time of the year. Utilising grass growth correctly at this crucial time of the year will ensure optimal milk from grass during the rest of the grazing period. For this reason, during the autumn and early winter, all efforts should be focused on attaining the target average pasture cover required for a planned early turnout. To achieve this, the priority must be to introduce a slow grazing rotation to ensure adequate pasture cover. The sooner the reduction in daily grazing area is established the more feed there will be on the farm for an early turnout.

## When and what to graze?

Management during the autumn/winter must not compromise next spring's potential. Historically, dairy farms are the home for sheep during this period. The question is, can sheep be beneficial to grazing management of grass for the dairy herd?

### Pros

- Graze off old swards and promote higher quality grass in the spring.
- Prevent grazing pastures getting above the recommended pre-grazing 2,700kgDM/ha.
- Provide extra income.

### Cons

- Eat the grass that is needed to over-winter in order to start the spring grazing period early.
- Pasture grazed too hard, or sheep removed too late, will delay turnout.
- Sheep leave the entire grazed area at the same level. Not only will this delay turnout, but inevitably leads to a feast from famine situation, with pasture in early spring soon on top of the grazing herd.

Sheep can be beneficial if used in a structured way, however for many dairy farmers they will eat all grazing to the same level. So farmers will find themselves without focus or a plan of a feed wedge in the spring. They start turning out with a high feed block which is soon unmanageable and out of control, which results in an early failure.



## Tips for successful autumn grazing

Plan for a spring wedge: Most farms at moderate stocking levels require a target farm cover of ~2,200kg DM/ha at turnout. The aim is to achieve a feed wedge and avoid a feed block, so this will require a range in pastures of 2,700kg DM/ha down to 1,700 kg DM/ha. Remember, those pastures closed first or with the highest covers going into winter, should be grazed first in the spring to avoid canopy closure (where sun light is prevented from getting to the base of the plant, denying new season tillering), and delayed-growth, therefore early in the autumn you must take into consideration which are the most suitable areas to begin grazing.

**Increase rotation length:** Build the feed wedge by lengthening the rotation. This does restrict pasture DMI, but will result in more pasture available at the beginning of spring. Rotation length should increase gradually over the autumn to a maximum in early October of 40-45 days. A flush in autumn growth is the best way to help lengthen the rotation. Trials have proven that fields closed on the 1st October give one third to two thirds more spring grazing than those closed on 1st December. Fields closed early can be grazed down to 4-5cm residuals (1,450 cover) these will be the first grazed in the spring, whereas late grazed areas should have up to 10cm residuals (2,000 cover).



**Establish your target round length:** Don't forget round length is the area that the milking herd graze as a fraction of the total area available at the time for grazing. NOT THE NUMBER OF DAYS BETWEEN GRAZINGS. For example on a 100ha, during November you are likely to require a 40 day round which would mean offering 2.5 hectares per 24 hour grazing period.

**Measure and keep pasture cover records at all times through the season:** They will be invaluable for future planning. Carrying all the cover from the autumn to the spring is unlikely to happen, however if grazing managers know how much winter growth is likely to occur and have the confidence and knowledge as a result of historical records, lower covers can be left at closure.

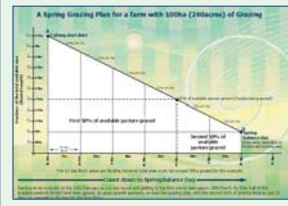


**Grass growth will be driven by soil temperature:** As the season progresses into autumn the soil temperature reduces which slows down grass growth. Rotational length must vary according to how fast ryegrass is growing. For the main part of the season grazing at 2.5 leaves is generally hitting the optimum of quality and quantity, but the reduced growth and the need to slow the round down will inevitably mean grazing at 3 leaves. Use this as another aid to achieving the target for round length on your farm in your location.

So start planning now for a successful grazing season in 2010, and remember the more grass you graze the more profit you make!

## Get your free copy of the laminated Spring Grazing Plan

In the last copy of Grazing Matters we looked in detail at the Spring Grazing Plan, and the importance it played to maximising profitability from grass during grazing season. We now have this available as a laminated technical worksheet. For your free copy email us now [astrong@genusbreeding.co.uk](mailto:astrong@genusbreeding.co.uk) giving details of your name and address, alternatively you can call us on 0870 900 1270.



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# GrazingMatters

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## British Friesian: Back to the future

Genus ABS were proud to sponsor the British Friesian Centenary Open Day, hosted by Ben and Adam Pullen, at Home Farm near Gloucester in April this year. The day was an outstanding success with around 350 people attending. Here Gareth Davies shares his thoughts on the event and why he believes the British Friesian is well placed to prosper as more people look to maximise profit from grass.



Ben Pullen, speaking at the British Friesian Centenary Open Day

This Issue:

Outstanding Success of the British Friesian

Maximising Grazed Grass and Profitability in Southern Ireland

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This was superbly demonstrated on the day by a herd of predominantly Genus ABS bred British Friesians that were averaging 7,750 litres at 4.4% fat and 3.3% protein, with a calving index of 384 days and an average of five lactations.



British Friesian Herd at Home Farm

"But the benefits of the breed don't stop there, not only does the herd stand alone as a high performing dairy herd in their own right, they also supply a huge financial spin off in the form of valuable male calves. The Pullens keep their bull calves and rear them as steer beef, and last year their income from all male calf sales equated to 8.5p per litre.

"The other key factor is the ability of the British Friesian to perform off a forage based diet. These cows produce over 4,000 litres from forage, and the steer beef is also produced predominantly from forage – cheap, simple and profitable.

"There is mounting evidence that you get a significant level of hybrid vigour using British Friesians on Holsteins, as a result of the completely different blood lines used over the past 50 years. This wouldn't be as high as with crossbreds, but you don't get the devaluation of stock, and you still have animals that you can register," Gareth concludes.



British Friesian at Home Farm



Visitors at the Centenary Open Day

**Irish milk producer Bryan Daniels, 29, is a keen advocate of milk from grazed grass and is having considerable success. Here he shares his approach to milk production.**

Bryan farms at the 132ha at Raheenarran, Co Kilkenny. Sitting 1,000ft above sea level the farm receives around 44 inches of rain per annum. Soils are peat and clay over slate making them fairly free-draining except after particularly heavy downpours.



Bryan Daniels

Bryan runs a herd of 130 spring calving pedigree British Friesians which calve in a twelve week block to maximise use of grazing. He is currently expanding the herd with a target of 280 cows in four years time. He intends to expand the herd using home reared animals and currently has 43 heifers due to calve in 2010 with a further 70 heifer calves in the pipeline.

"We are expanding the cows in place on the current beef enterprise as we have the land available and believe the system will be more profitable," Bryan explains.

Bryan's mother takes charge of calf rearing and all calves are fed milk twice a day and have access to calf meal. They are turned out at 6-8 weeks old, are weaned off milk at around 10 weeks and off meal shortly afterwards. All heifer replacements are reared outside for 11 months of the year on grass and silage. Between weaning and calving they will receive no more than 120kg concentrates per head. He serves his heifers at around fifteen months old at a target weight of 310-325kgs.

For nine years the breeding focus has been on fertility and protein percentage. "The tight calving window is vital for our system so fertility is the number one priority. We also select for milk quality as the milk payment scheme pays a bonus for fat and protein content but has a negative for volume, so we need milk that is as rich as possible to maximise our price."



In the past Bryan has been able to achieve a calving block of nine weeks but this has been extended to 12 weeks to help reduce the number of empty cows and maintain the rate of expansion. The empty rate currently runs at 8-10%.

Cows start calving on 25th January with the entire herd being dried off on 15th December. All cows are tail painted three weeks before the start of the breeding window and heats recorded. Any cow calved more than six weeks and not seen bulling by the start of the service period is seen by the vet.

Once the breeding period starts, all cows are served based on disturbance of the tail paint. AI is used for six weeks and after that Bryan uses a team of stock bulls for a further six weeks.

The herd calving interval stands at 362 days with a non-return rate during the six week AI period of 84%.

Grazing management plays a huge part in the success of the operation, and it is here that his methods differ from the usual methods adopted in the UK. He targets a 320 day grazing season, trying to get a full 305 day

lactation from the entire herd.



He turns out at the end of January and starts with twelve hour grazing blocks, but as soon as possible he increases to twenty-four hour blocks, and then to forty-eight hour blocks. The idea behind this is that the cows have three high quality grazings and one very tight grazing per paddock, and by doing this he is able to graze the paddock to a residual of 1,200kgs.

Concentrates are fed based on grassland availability with a maximum rate of 4kg/cow/day. No concentrate is fed after 1st April.

He also makes sure they start the new paddock in the evening so that if the grazing is tight on the fourth grazing they are only on it between daytime milkings and not overnight. In addition, if it has been a sunny day the sugars in the grass of the new paddock will be higher.

He turns cows into paddocks at around 2,400kgs ensuring that what they are eating is all leaf and high energy. His target at magic day (the day grass growth exceeds grass grazed) is to have two to three days grazing ahead of him.

Paddock range from 1.1-5.5ha and the main grazing block has been reseeded in the last eight years. Bryan is currently reseeding the block that will help provide grazing to the expanded herd as it is essential to have high quality grazing on offer.

Last year he grew 11,500kgs of DM/Ha using 76kgs N/Ha. After the first grazing round he spreads 2,500 gallons of slurry per acre and the colder conditions mean he achieves better N uptake. Small amounts of N are spread during the season after the cows come out of the paddocks. Paddocks are routinely topped with a mower angled towards the ground to cut the residual

down to the around 1,100kgs, to ensure better quality grazing.

He targets an average farm cover of 1,900kgs after the final round of grazing, and gets around 2kgs/day of growth through the winter.

Bryan needs enough silage to feed the cows for up to three months. He takes one cut in mid-June with paddocks being shut up once the grass budget shows he has sufficient grazing available. "As soon as we are sure we have adequate grazing we shut up enough ground to make around 75% of our silage requirements, usually around 15th to 25th April. We make the final 25% by cutting paddocks as and when we can see the grass getting ahead of the cows. This allows us to top up silage while also maintaining sward quality."

Due to difficult weather last year, Bryan had his poorest performing year to date where the herd averaged 4,600 litres at 4.1% fat and 3.71% protein from 250kgs of concentrate. This year he is on target for 5,200 litres thanks to the better grazing season.

He has recently started a whole herd health plan with his vet, focusing on prevention rather than cure. Last year the herd was blood tested for IBR, BVD Leptospirosis and Johnes disease. Any carrying infections were culled out of the herd. Even with this blood testing and his dry cow tubes his vet bill still only came to £40 per cow.

Bryan believes membership of a local discussion group network has helped him transform the business. "I thought I was doing well until I went to my first discussion group meeting, which was a bit of an eye opener!"



In Ireland there is a structure throughout the country for the discussion groups. First you join your local group and if you are successful within that group

and with your business, you can get invited to join the regional group where you would go through an interview type process to see if you would enhance the group, and see if it is right for you. Once in this group you have to attend their meetings, if you miss more than two meetings you are deemed uncommitted and are asked to leave, opening the door to other more ambitious farmers.

"All the information from the regional discussion group then gets taken back by the members to their local groups. I think this is

a fantastic way to keep everyone fresh and on their toes.

"At the groups I get constantly challenged about why I don't cross breed. My answer is quite simple. My cows are outperforming the cows in the other group members herds on calving interval and protein levels, and while I have good demand for my bull calves for fattening or as stock bulls, I am not convinced cross-breeding would be a benefit?"

**On Monday the 7th September 2009, 26 grazing enthusiasts headed to Ireland for our first Genus ABS Discussion Group trip. Throughout the four day trip they visited a number of very different systems, who were all achieving great results from grass. Here Gareth Davies, UK Grassland Genetics Manager, talks us through the farms that were visited.**

**First visit:** Paddy O'Leary's farm, Conna, Co Cork. The farm was the winner of the all Ireland EBI herd competition. This was a farm open day and was set up with a number of informative and interesting stations including; breeding and bull selection, heifer management, technical performance, autumn grassland management – and much more. The farm had bred Ballybride Dano, who's mother now happens to be the top EBI cow in the herd, and she was on display.



Research trials at Moorepark Research Institute

**Second visit:** Moorepark Research Institute. Firstly we received a presentation by Pat Dillon

on current research trials and results from previous trials. Following on from this Mike O'Donovan, head of grazing research, took us out to see the research trials in practise and their out wintering/stand off pad, along with their calf rearing facilities.

**Third visit:** Frank O'Brien's farm. An outstanding example of a minimalistic farm, with a 16/32 basic parlour and a stand off/out wintering pad, nothing more nothing less. Frank and his Teagasc Consultant Michael gave a presentation. Here we went through the impressive performance figures of the farm; he had a cost of production of 14.08c/l excluding labour/rent/interest, 79% of cows calved in six weeks, and 93% calved in February and March, he has a calving interval of 362 days, an average farm cover of 2,284 kgs/DM/Ha, and pre-grazing covers of 3,200 kgs/DM/Ha. This was followed by a farm walk.

**Fourth visit:** Bryan Daniels farm. Bryan runs a herd of pedigree British Friesian cows 1,000ft above sea level, his herd performance shows that 84% of his cows will calve in six weeks next year, he is averaging 3.68% protein and his cost of production excluding labour/rent/interest was 15.88c/l.

It was a fantastic trip with everyone enjoying the visits, finding it informative and believing that it would benefit their business.

## Irish Trip Report