

Emerald Excursion



Gareth Davies,
Grassland Genetics
Manager

Ireland is a valuable source of genetics for our Grassland Cornerstone Breeding Programme. In November, our UK Grassland Genetics Manager, Gareth Davies and Grassland Specialist,

Justin Rees spent a week in the Emerald Isle meeting the Genus ABS Ireland staff and visiting a variety of Irish dairy farms. Here they report on their experience.

The first thing we noticed is the average herd size was around seventy five cows, far smaller than we have here in the UK. The other main difference, noticeable immediately, is the greater emphasis that Irish farmers place on their grazing. Every farm that we visited utilised the available pasture to its maximum. Measuring the grass regularly to establish their feed wedge and ensuring that it was grazed at its optimum to maximise its feed value.

Once the conversation turned to their genetics, every single farmer had the same two main criteria: fertility and protein. As most of the farms were block calving, the fertility was an obvious choice, as it is with UK block calving herds. Everyone wants their cows to calve at the beginning of their block because days in milk is one of the key profit drivers.

The protein was a bit different, in Ireland their milk contracts are weighted towards milk solids and protein in particular, which explains why it is so important to them.

There is also the widely held belief that the higher the percentage the protein the more fertile the cow. It is therefore no coincidence that the EBI index is also heavily weighted towards these two traits.

It was very evident the amount of effort that there had been to get the Irish farmers to buy into the EBI concept, every farmer we spoke to used it to a greater or lesser degree. Most of

the farmers we spoke to used it as a tool, by using it to concentrate on the sub-indices that mattered most to them (fertility + protein), but there were some breeders who just looked at the overall EBI score.

Another difference between Ireland and the UK was the value placed on the bull calves, not only to sell at three weeks old, but as beef animals in their own right. A lot of farmers would rear their bull calves cheaply on grass for 20-22 months and then finish them indoors at around 25 months, possible because the cows are generally less extreme in the UK.

We noticed a variety of milk yields from 4,500 – 6,500 litres, achieved from 150 – 500kgs of concentrate at an average of around 8% milk solids, with the best farm being just short of 9% milk solids.

The last farm visit was Brian Daniels, the 2007 young dairy farmer of the year, in County Kilkenny. It was a privilege to spend an afternoon in his company, his farm is nearly 1,000ft above sea level with an annual rainfall of 44 inches and he had a fabulous herd of 150 pure British Friesians, which he calved in a nine week block.

For the past two years he had an empty rate of just under 5%. His criteria for an efficient cow, was one that could produce 0.9kgs of milk solids per kg of bodyweight. He is also adamant that he could not achieve the results that he has without the benefits of milk recording.



This was a great example of what the pure British Friesian can do in a intense grazing system.

This Issue:

**Spring Grazing
Plan**

**Meet the new
Grassland Team
Members**

Justin Rees, Grassland Specialist for Genus ABS reviews the key to any successful grass based herd – grazing management.

Early February to mid April is the most important time on a dairy farm for focusing on high utilisation of pasture through maximising grazing efficiency and grass growth.

For the wider industry early February is still the middle of winter chores and heavy feeding programmes, but the focused spring calving operators are starting to prepare for extending the grazing season and offer the fresh calved cows some of their Dry Matter (DM) demand in the form of pasture. This doesn't happen by coincidence, as a plan is formulated for the start of the grazing season (approximately 120 days before the start of calving) so pasture is allocated to the milking herd to start grazing. After a few seasons of getting experience, producers have the knowledge and confidence to be able to offer these first grazers a good bite of medium quality pasture.

The aim of the Spring Grazing Plan (SGP) is to budget the land area available to the number of cows and fully utilise grass growth throughout the spring months. A key part of the plan is selecting the most suitable ground. For example, most producers like to graze the heaviest ground early with the least number of cows, as it is possible that this might get wetter and the risk of poaching increases as the season progresses. Knowing how much grass in terms of DM your cows need is essential in formulating the plan.

The Cow

A typical UK dairy cow of 600kg requires the following energy per day (Dry Matter demand varies with each stage of lactation).

Output per day	Requirement per day
Maintenance	73MJ
Walking and grazing	10MJ
2kg Milk Solids	136MJ
Total	219MJ

Assuming spring grass has an ME value of 12MJ, a DMI of 16kg/day would provide 192MJ ME/day (12 x 16), a shortfall of 30MJ,

or six litres worth of milk. Therefore selecting the right genetics for a grazing system and monitoring feed intake is key in managing this energy deficit.

The Spring Grazing Plan

AIMS

● **Budget grazing area available to the number of cows**

Commence grazing with fresh calvers or indeed stale Autumn milkers. The aim is not to exceed the area allocations but the plan gives flexibility to allow for ground conditions.

● **Fully utilise grass**

Limiting grazing in the early season maximises grass for the whole season. Grass grazed in February and March grows with more vigour in April and May. This improves utilisation by always being able to offer the cows quality grass to graze, increasing the opportunity to efficiently increase milk production from grass.

● **Prevent unnecessary poaching**

Having a plan and budgeting the area per cow is key to preventing poaching but farm infrastructure is vital. Good cow tracks are necessary so all paddocks have adequate access to minimise poaching. Well laid cow tracks also have added benefits to the cow by avoiding unnecessary injury to feet.

● **Supplementation**

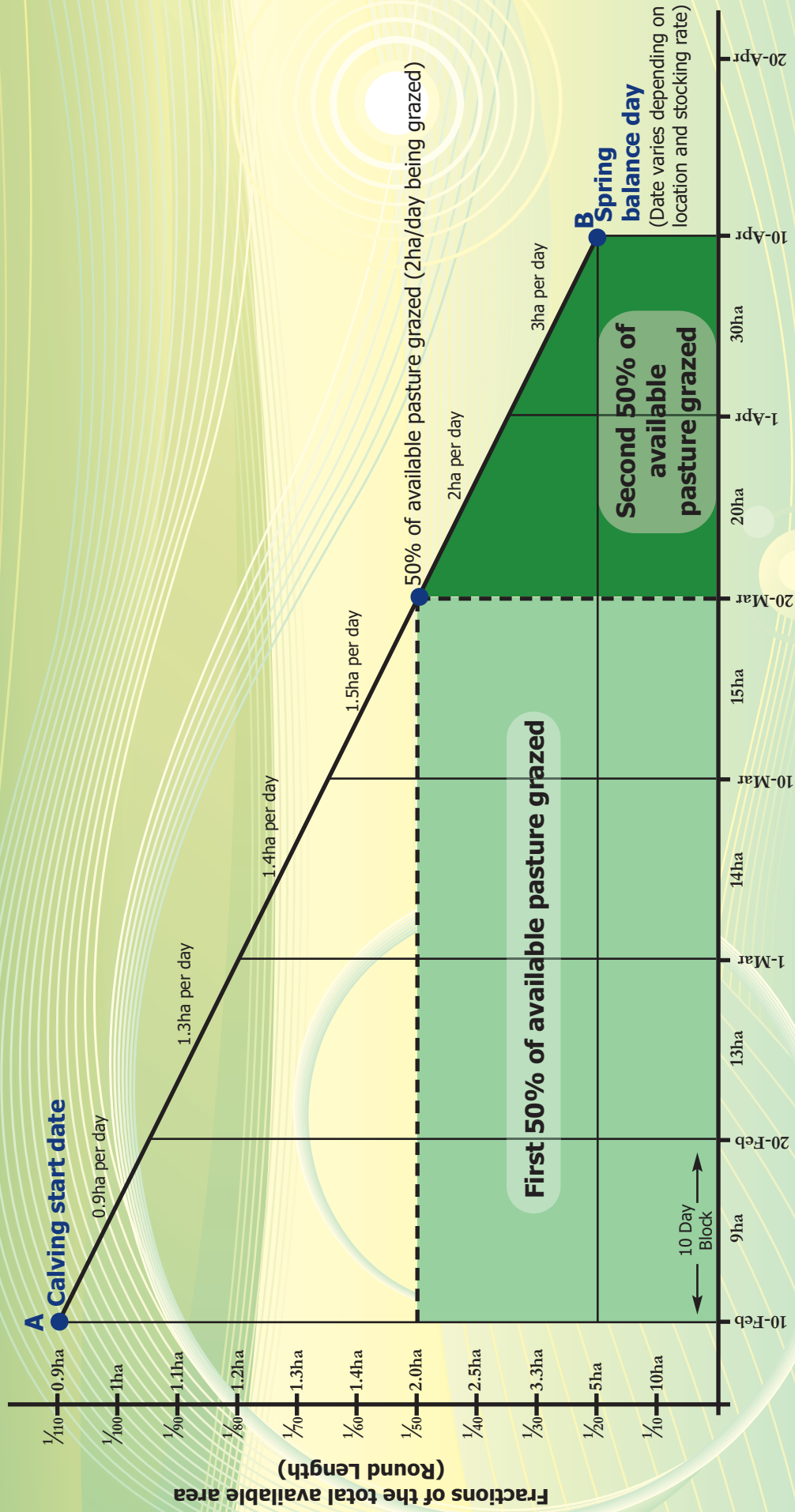
The introduction of supplements is key to maintaining production and cow health and fertility but the grass area must not be compromised.

● **Target**

You must aim to have grazed 50% of the available area by 20 days before Spring Balance Day, the day grass growth starts to exceed feed demand. The actual date depends on stocking rate and location (Spring Balance Day is shown on the plan opposite), with the remaining 50% grazed in to Spring Balance Day (point B).

Grazing Plan

A Spring Grazing Plan for a farm with 100ha (240acres) of Grazing



The 10 day block areas are flexible, however total area must not exceed 50ha grazed for this example

Count down to Spring Balance Day

Starting as an example on the 10th February at 110 day round and getting to the first critical date approx 20th March. By then half of the available pasture should have been grazed. As grass growth quickens, so does the grazing plan, with the second 50% of grazing done in just 20 days (as opposed to 40 days for the first 50%).



Meet the new Grassland team members

Name: Gareth Davies

Current Role: Grassland Genetics Manager

Family: Married to Alison and we have two children Hannah and Dewi

Location: Lives in South Wales (Swansea Valley)



Agricultural Background: I was born and brought up on the family farm, which I became a partner of when I was 18. Since leaving the farm I have had a variety of jobs which have been mainly in the agricultural sector, including nearly three years working for LIC.

Our farm was an old fashioned mixed family farm, with a small British Friesian dairy herd, a small black and white suckler herd, a small flock of sheep with a few pigs running around the woods. The majority of our milk was produced from grass which we used to strip graze everyday. During the winter months the cows would stay out by day and in by night. During winter we used to strip graze Kale and feed hay, the only concentrate they would get would be a small amount of cake in the parlour. We were also unique in our area as we were producer retailers. We bottled all our milk and sold it on a milk round. Our milk was sold as "green top milk", basically it was filtered cooled and bottled and not pasteurised. Because we supplied directly to the public our milk was tested daily, and we had to be in band A constantly, which made us focus on good milking routines.

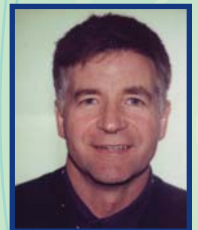
Unfortunately I had to leave the farm 12 years ago as a result of a serious farming accident, this accident also put paid to my rugby career, which was equally difficult to come to terms with as rugby has always been a huge part of my life.

It is my intention in my new post, to lead the grassland team within Genus ABS and provide the pasture based British dairy farmers with the genetics that they require and the back up that they are accustomed to.

Name: Justin Rees

Current Role: Grassland Specialist

Location: Lives in Powys in Wales



Agricultural Background: I have been involved with registered Holsteins all my working life, three times a day milking, all year round calving, high profile families, classifying, considerable ET work and intensive management. I was introduced to a grazing group and started pushing Holsteins out to graze pasture.

In 2000, while on holiday in New Zealand I saw 900 Jerseys farmed in Waikato. On returning to Knill Farm we started with some of the first Danish Jerseys calving in the spring. Then two years later we had the Holsteins for sale and further imports of Jerseys replaced all the black and whites.

After 23 years at Knill Farm in Wales, I left to manage a farm in South Canterbury, New Zealand milking 500 spring calving cows. In 2002, I was offered a wonderful opportunity of working for a company milking 40,000 cows on 38 farms. A real challenge with the family mucking in and employing one relief milker. I got the experience I was looking for with a very competitive performance environment within the company. I was able to measure my own ability as a grazing manager against other managers and sharemilkers in the company with regular performance information peeling out of the fax.

I returned to the UK in June 2003 and started working with LIC, and joined Genus ABS in October 2008.



For more information on ABS Grassland Genetics, Alpha Building, London Road, Nantwich CW5 7JW.
Tel 0870 162 2000 Fax 01270 616702 www.genusbreeding.co.uk

Calls may be monitored for training purposes.