

UNIT : THE BEEF COW – GRASSLAND MANAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

Grass is potentially the cheapest feed available – a key issue in beef cow systems where keeping feed costs down is one of the main keys to profitability. The availability and quality of grazed grass can vary widely and good management is essential in order to capitalise fully on its potential.

THE POTENTIAL OF GRASS

Well managed grassland can easily meet the nutritional requirements of the beef cow without the need for alternative or purchased feeds. Only in the milder parts of the country and with careful management during the late summer to spring months can grazed grass alone suffice, but in collaboration with an effective silage or hay making system the needs of the cow should be met all year round. An eye needs to be kept on costs, particularly silage making however, and alternative feeds and forages considered where appropriate.

PASTURE TYPES

Grasses – most suckler herds are found in parts of the country such as the uplands which are associated with unimproved or, at best, semi-improved long term or permanent pastures. Cows are generally stocked fairly extensively and rear calves in fairly harsh conditions before the weaned calves are housed or moved to more productive pastures. Suckler cows will respond to the improved nutritional status of reseeded pastures, especially non-native breeds and crossbreds.

Legumes – white clover can play an important role as it can be difficult to justify applying large quantities of nitrogen fertiliser.

PASTURE MAINTENANCE AND IMPROVEMENT

Reseeding – provides opportunities to

- Improve grassland quality and palatability
- Reduce fertiliser use through introducing clover

Although costly, the investment can pay dividends and reseeded pastures can be included as part of a cropping programme with forages such as kale for outdoor winter feeding or cereals for silage quickly.

Attention to

- Drainage and soil compaction

- Soil fertility
- Grazing pressure, frequency and seasonality
- Weed control

can result in dramatic improvements in grassland productivity over time.

FERTILISER AND MANURE

Manures – best possible use must be made of manure or slurry produced on the holding and the Code of Good Practice and any legislation adhered to:

- Target deficient soils and silage or hay fields

Fertiliser – must be used in accordance with needs to make up any deficit and encourage strategic growth e.g. spring or late summer and, wherever possible, complement clover.

GRAZING

Most suckler cows are managed by means of continuous grazing, often with sheep when the advantage can be taken of the benefits of mixed grazing but, when cows are stocked more intensively or when grass is being rationed, rotational grazing can work well.

Grass Height – grazing height is the best means of achieving the best compromise between animal performance and pasture growth and utilisation

- Height too low
 - Low intake – lower milk yield (poorer calf growth), body condition loss (cows should be gaining condition on summer grass)
 - Reduced pasture growth
- Height too great
 - Wasted grass
 - Poor animal performance in mid and late summer as the wasted grass deteriorates in quality and restricts fresh growth

Target pasture heights (cm) for continuously grazed suckler cows

Cows and calves	7-9
Dry cows	5-7

SILAGE OR HAY

Moderate quality hay or silage should be good enough for all but freshly calved suckler cows with emphasis placed on high yields and producing enough silage to last the winter. Attention must still be paid to detail in order to minimise wastage and to produce palatable fodder to ensure high intakes.

CONCLUSION

- Well managed grassland can easily meet the nutritional requirements of the beef cow without the need for alternative or purchased feeds.
- Most suckler herds are found in parts of the country such as the uplands which are associated with unimproved or, at best, semi-improved long term or permanent pastures.
- White clover can play an important role as it can be difficult to justify applying large quantities of nitrogen fertiliser.
- Best possible use must be made of manure or slurry produced on the holding and fertiliser used to complement these.
- Most suckler cows are managed by means of continuous grazing but, when cows are stocked more intensively or when grass is being rationed, rotational grazing can work well. Grazing height is the best means of achieving the best compromise between animal performance and pasture growth and utilisation
- Moderate quality hay or silage should be good enough for all but freshly calved suckler cows with emphasis placed on high yields and producing enough silage to last the winter.

INFORMATION SOURCES

HCC (2007) Making the Most of your Suckler Cows

HCC (2008) Grassland Management