

Red Meat Development Programme

G4ce News

Getting to Grips with Grazing Grass



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Final August 2011 Newsletter

Another summer is over; rams are being bought and prepared for tugging, other livestock sales are in full swing and it's time to plan winter feeding by checking quantity and quality of silage stocks.

HCC and the Grassland Development Centre would like to take this opportunity to thank all farmers who have participated in the G4ce project over the past six months, at the NSA Welsh Sheep event, Grassland and Muck 2011, The Royal Welsh Agricultural Show, RMDP G4ce open days and with several RMDP discussion groups.

The most common comment was **"I need to graze my fields when the grass is shorter"** and many of you went home with a Farming Connect sward stick to help you manage your grazing.

Anybody who didn't get a sward stick and would like one please do get in touch with HCC. The interest generated by the project suggests there will be more beef and sheep farmer measuring grass in future to maintain quality and quantity of swards and optimise animal performance.

Getting to Grips with Grazing Grass- Key Points

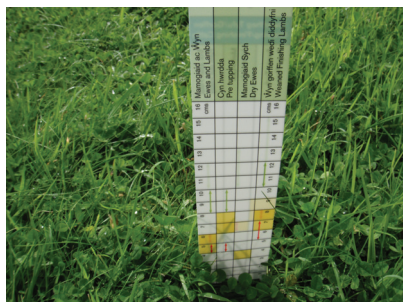
Grazing grass at the right height will improve:-

- Grass Utilisation
- Livestock growth rates
- Sward quality
- Extend sward life

Improving both profits and your carbon footprint.

Different Grass Measuring Tools - farmer conclusions

Sward Sticks



The two G4ce farmers who used sward sticks found them practical, easy to use and easy to carry around with them.

Hand held rising plate meter



This type of plate meter was also easy to use and could be used in the field either on foot, or for speed, carried on a quad bike. The model tested automatically recorded sward height and the number of measurements, and gave a read out of average sward height. This was then converted to kgDM/ha. Calibrating the plate meter by cutting and drying grass samples is currently the most accurate method to ensure the tool is farm specific. However, experience and discussion with other farmers showed that the electronic plate meter was not always that durable in wet conditions.

The Feed Reader



The Feed Reader is fixed to the front of a quad bike and records sward height by ultrasound. It required a lot of technical input to get set up, but it is now in full use at Bodrida, Anglesey.

For more information on this type of grass measuring tool, go to: http://www.farmworkssystems.co.nz/cms/page.php?view=feed_reader

Weekly readings of grass growth are being taken and fed into a computer programme that maps changes in grass height from week to week, and provides field specific graphs indicating grass. The G4ce page on the GDC website illustrates the type of information that is collected by the Feed Reader:

http://www.grassdevcentre.co.uk/G4ce_results.htm

Cages

All the G4ce farmers felt they benefitted from using cages on their farms. These were used to show how much grass growth there was even when stock were grazing.

When the cages were used in conjunction with weekly measurements with a sward stick, weekly growth could



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The European Agricultural Fund for
Rural Development: Europe Investing in
Rural Areas



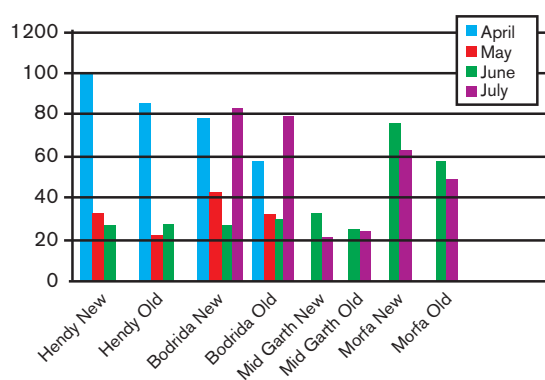
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be compared. This gave an indication of when grass growth speeded up or slowed down, providing advance warning of surpluses or deficits so that:

- stock numbers could be increased or reduced, supplementary feed introduced, or
- the grazing area could be enlarged or reduced in order to maintain grass at the optimal sward height, to maintain grass quality and livestock growth rates.

Grass yield was also measured by cutting grass from under the cages. This information can be used to calibrate measuring equipment for each farm so that yield in kgDM/ha can be calculated. This information can be useful to compare yields from one field to another to aid reseeding decisions and also to help produce grass budgets. It also showed how much grass growth varied from month to month.

Variation in Dry Matter Production kgDM/ha per day



Grass budgets are used in the dairy industry in Wales to help plan and manage grazing rotations and are used on livestock farms in other parts of the world. The use of grass budgets on livestock farms in Wales is an area that should be explored and may be helpful particularly with predicted changes in climate.

By the summer the G4ce farmers felt that with the experience they had gained they could estimate sward height by eye without a measuring tool and would use the tools again in the spring to get their “eye back in”.

Grass Quality

Analysis of grass quality was useful to understand and highlight energy, crude protein and dry matter levels. It gave

the G4ce farmers the confidence that they could manage grass well and showed that grazed grass could be used to replace concentrate feeds when the sward height is correct for the livestock and the sward is not too wet.



If quality had deteriorated the results acted as a rapid prompt to alter management and encouraged the farmers to look at ways to improve the quality of grass in front of productive stock.

G4ce farmers also carried out visual assessments of sward quality and looked at % ryegrass and clover, bare ground and weeds. This is a useful way of highlighting fields that can be improved by management and those that would benefit from reseeding.

Finally a big thank-you to the G4ce farmers for taking part in this Farming Connect funded project, using their own time to measure and record grass growth and quality and share their experiences with others.

The positive outcomes of the project are best described by the farmers themselves:

‘It’s given us real evidence of improved yields of the new leys compared with the old leys. We’ve started looking at grass as a crop and counting the value of every kg of DM, making sure we’re not wasting it and using it better’ Richard Rogers

‘The G4ce project has given me more faith in grass. By measuring grass I was able to cut concentrates quickly at turn out, saving me money. I have been able to give livestock the right quantity and quality of grass during the season to optimise growth rates and sward quality’ Keith Williams

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The Red Meat Development Programme is delivered by Hybu Cig Cymru (HCC) on behalf of Farming Connect. For further information, ring 01970 625050 or visit www.hccmpw.org.uk

Monthly G4ce Question

How can I manage my grazing to reduce the cost of winter feeding?

Well-drained fields can be shut up for extended or deferred grazing and some fertiliser applied, where grass has grown well and swards are longer than the recommended grazing height for the class of stock, where silage stocks are limited or if you just want to try to save money.

The additional grazing can be used for any class of livestock and helps save on silage and concentrate costs.

Scottish Agricultural College compared the winter costs of keeping a control group and a deferred grazing group of spring calving suckler cows. A significant saving of £0.67 per cow per day was achieved by allowing cows to remain at grass for a further 60 days (November until January) <http://www.hccmpw.org.uk/medialibrary/publications/IGER%20WM03.2.pdf>.

Building up a surplus of grass for grazing ewes in mid pregnancy can save money and conserved forage and may protect business from fluctuating feed prices in the spring. The financial return from applying a nitrogen fertiliser now (summer) is likely to be approximately 9:1 in terms of ewe and lamb productivity.