

## Improving grass utilisation in Northern Ireland

 19 November 2017



Northern Ireland has 317,000 dairy cows producing some 2.3 billion litres on 2,700 dairy farms. As a region Northern Ireland is heavily dependent on exports and as a result has a very variable milk price. In 2013/14 the milk price averaged 33.06 pence per litre. This fell to 19.93 pence per litre in 2015/16. As a result, net profit per cow (excluding farm labour costs) fell from £744 to £127. However, there is considerable variation in profitability from the top 25% to the bottom 25%. In 2015/16 net profit per cow for the top quartile was £358, whereas in the same year the bottom quartile made a loss of £182 per cow.

One of the key drivers of profitability is milk for forage and grazed grass in particular. Since 1999, AgriSearch in conjunction with its research partner AFBI (Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute) has operated "GrassCheck" a programme which aims to provide high quality, up-to-date grass growth and quality information to assist farmers with grassland management decisions and support improvements in grass utilisation on Northern Ireland livestock farms.

This year (2017) AgriSearch increased the scope of the project to bring in grass growth and quality data from 35 commercial dairy, beef and sheet farms across Northern Ireland.

Each of the farmer co-researchers have been equipped with the latest GPS rising plate-meters to measure grass covers. On-farm grass growth and quality is measured throughout the grass growing season on a weekly and fortnightly basis, respectively.

In addition, 24 weather stations have been deployed on these pilot farms to record a wide range of meteorological data from across Northern Ireland. This cutting-edge technology is being used to provide farmers with up-to-date information of grass growing conditions and grass quality in their locality to help them make the most of this valuable resource.

To assist the pilot farmers to adopt the technology on their farms a "WhatsApp group" was created enabling them to talk with each other and the scientists responsible for the project. This has helped create a real team spirit around the project.

Throughout the grazing season, weekly bulletins were published in the local agricultural press each week. This bulletin features grass growth and key weather data in each of the six counties of Northern Ireland. In addition, the project has a dedicated website and social media platforms with over 2,000 Facebook followers. In September three farms walks were held across Northern Ireland to transfer the messages from the first year of this new expanded project.

The feedback from the farmers involved has been very positive. They have much more confidence in their grazing management skills and several of them were looking to increase the stocking rate to utilise the additional grass grown. One key lesson was the considerable variation in grass yields from field to field within each farm. Armed with this knowledge the farmers are now taking remedial action to improve grass growth in the poorer performing paddocks (e.g. reseeding).

## Research Themes

EuroDairy drives the engine of innovations on 4 main themes at dairy farms: animal care, biodiversity, resource efficiency and socio-economic resilience. Find more info on these dairy topics here!

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