

Pasture Quality Trend (August 2018)

We have had a very mild and dry winter which has maintained higher than normal pasture production, this combined with much better utilisation of both pasture and winter crops has created much higher covers on most farms. If you are in this situation, review your policy around round length and your spring rotation planner. Holding back to similar pasture allocations as previous years will push these low quality, high covers in front of you for much longer. In addition, these 3500-4500 covers will not really start growing until they are grazed and to get the cows firing we need as much good quality growth as possible.

Dry Matter (DM) (%)

DM has stuck between 18 and 22% all winter and held steady throughout the first round so far. There are some tests that we are seeing that have higher than normal DM% which is catching out farmers as there is more pasture in the paddock than measured and the cows are leaving higher than normal residuals.

Soil temperature has remained very steady, but over the last 5 days it has started creeping up to close to 7°C, as it heads over 8°C pasture growth will start increasing. Low soil temperatures (<10°C) reduce the rate of nitrification (ammonium to plant available nitrate), and therefore limits potential production. If you need early pasture production, then applying ASN (ammonia, sulphate, and nitrate) will provide plant available nitrate for immediate uptake, increasing pasture growth at low temperatures. Once soil temperatures increase and the first round pasture has been grazed we expect the DM% to drop again. For the time being, there may be more pasture in the paddock than the plate meter suggests.

Crude Protein (CP) (%)

Protein levels in the pasture have been variable between farms, with a trend for lower CP% on the higher covers. It is advisable to let the milkers pick the best of the high covers to select a better-quality diet and have dry cows following behind to help clean up residuals. Reviewing the manure will give you a good “report card” of the cows protein status, but this information needs to be considered with the milk protein % and MU's.

Be careful if you are using springers to do this job as due to the reasonable growth and plant activity this winter, we suspect that there is more K in the pasture than normal and we are having to do some more drastic diet manipulation and DCAD rations to prevent milk fever. We would suggest that 1.5% down cows is normal, lower is always better, but if you are at 5% down cows, then there is a major problem that needs to be addressed on your farm. Downer cows are a major drag on profitability.

Neutral Detergent Fibre (NDF) (%)

NDF has been very low over the last few months, rarely getting above 40%, which has been surprising due to the higher covers. This low NDF% will help maintain pasture intake on these longer covers, where normally we would see 40-45% NDF, dropping intake and creating a very tough situation to try and get through them without impacting production and reproduction.

Metabolisable Energy (MJME/kg DM)

The energy density of the pasture has been moderate for this time of year, the low NDF will help with digestibility, but the age and presence of the 4th and 5th leaves (with 1st and 2nd leaves dying) drops the quality across the whole sward.

