

Good grass growth, but wet

Plan now to revive a

It's been one of the wettest winters for several decades, but it's not all bad news for producers who are hoping for an early bite. We spoke to some of the UK's leading grass specialists to find out more.

text **Rachael Porter**

The weather has been extremely wet but, although some parts of the UK have seen severe flooding, many counties in the eastern and more northerly regions have stayed relatively dry. These areas, thanks in part to warmer than usual winter temperatures, could be looking at early turnout, according to Pearce Seeds' John Harris.

"Particularly producers who've really looked after their pasture," he says. "Swards with no compaction and that are well aerated and that were not grazed too late in 2013 could be ready for a first bite in early March. Some may have even taken a bit in late February.

"It's been a mild winter and grass in most parts of the UK has continued to grow, albeit slowly. The soil won't take long to warm up come the early spring and grass growth should take off relatively quickly, if we don't see the late cold snap that we saw in March 2013."

Mr Harris is based in Tiverton, Devon, and says that there are some producers local to him who have turned out early and taken advantage of what's been an exceptionally warm winter, once conditions were dry enough under foot.

Grass growth

Get out there and see what you've got. That's the advice to producers across the UK from DairyCo's grass specialist Piers Badnell.

"Many producers will probably have a good idea of how water logged their land is, but they may be pleasantly surprised by just how much grass growth there is in some areas," he says. "Soil temperatures are high for the time of year. In early February some soils were already around 9°C and this should be considerably higher come early March.

"It's important to assess fields on an individual basis," he stresses. "I've seen units with two or three fields that could have been grazed in mid February, if they had good access tracks. So it's important that producers get out there and go for a walk."



conditions could stall turnout

and maximise grazing



“It’s vital to get the cows out if at all possible so they can take that grass. In such mild weather conditions, the grass can very soon get away from you. Having good cow tracks will really come into its own in a year like this.”

Once grazing begins, which should be when grass plants reach the three-leaf stage, you can start to build up a wedge and have fields at different stages of growth.

Cows can easily take between 4kgDM and 5kgDM in a morning. And that will set up the rotation for the rest of the grazing season.

Ideally producers should feel a bit of anxiety about their wedge and be concerned about where the next few days of grazing are going to come from. “If producers feel that they’ve got their grazing sorted, then they’ve probably got a bit too much,” he adds. Oliver Seeds’ Rod Bonshor advises producers to take their time and avoid rushing in this spring – whether it’s for grazing or first cut. “Fortunately there are still good forage stocks on many units, after a good harvest in 2013, so there’s not too much pressure on producers to turnout.

“The issue this year isn’t grass growth but, in many parts of the country, conditions under foot. Units with good tracks may be OK, but many are not so fortunate. And the main problem is often once the cows get onto the field – they can do a lot of damage to a sward if they’re turned out too early and the ground is too soft.

“I hear producers say that the grass will recover after a little poaching, but it’s often the meadow species that colonise and not the desirable forage grasses. The ley is never as productive as it once was. Once it’s damaged it will stay damaged. So the key is to avoid damage if at all possible. So walk the fields and get a realistic view.”

Flood damage

In areas that have been hardest hit by rain and floods, March will herald the start of a salvage, repair and restoration operation on both grazing and silage swards.

“Flooding has a devastating impact on the grass, the soil, and the worms and micro organisms that keep it healthy and productive,” says Mr Harris.

Standing flood water not only kills grass and suffocates earth worms, but it also causes considerable compaction issues. Just 8mm of standing water per hectare exerts four tonnes of pressure on the soil.

“So not only do producers need to look at the mineral status and pH of their soil, because high rain fall and flooding can ‘flush’ essential plant

nutrients out of the soil, but they also need to dig a pit to check the soil profile for any signs of compaction. Depending on the severity of that compaction, they could be looking at sub soiling or aeration to improve its profile.

“It’s vital that producers should take a ‘bottom up’ approach when dealing with flood and heavy rain damaged swards. Test the soil and make sure you know what’s going on beneath the surface before you even think about over- or reseeded,” says Mr Bonshor.

“Swards that have been under water for six weeks or more will require a re-seed. For other less severely damaged swards a stiff-tined harrow to scratch the soil surface and fill any holes, with a mounted seed box, should do the trick. A Cambridge roll over the top will ensure good soil-to-seed contact. Seed needs to be pressed and slightly incorporated into the soil,” says Mr Bonshor.

He adds that to help establish a ley, a bit of soluble nitrogen close to the root should also speed up establishment and produce a dense sward.

If you are looking at a spring reseed, John Harris recommends using a standard grass seed mixture – for grazing and/or silage – and around 5kg per hectare of Westerwolds.

“This is a fast establishing and growing short-term, one-year ley grass that will be ideal for beefing up the grazing wedge or adding an extra few tonnes of yield for silage. It also responds well to fertiliser.”

Since it’s not ideal to go from one grass ley to another, another option is to sow stubble turnips or forage rape in late March. “This will be ready for grazing in between eight and 10 weeks,” explains Mr Harris.

Land pressure

Not only will this provide something for herds to graze, but it will also take the pressure off other grazing and silaging fields and allow producers to build up a wedge. “These crops also add organic matter back into the soil and, when they’re finished, there’s time to get in early with an autumn grass reseed.”

“If land is prone to flooding, sowing species that are more able to tolerate a high water table may be an option,” adds Mr Bonshor.

“These include meadow fescue, timothy and cocksfoot – more traditional grasses. These will be able to stand a short period under water submersion due to their root structure.

“And they’re also able to cope better if soil fertility dips. They could have an increasing role to play on units if flooding is set to become more common place and they’re good summer grasses, so there’s some potential there. Ryegrasses, on the other hand, are ‘bred to be fed’.”

With so many decisions to be made, Mr Harris suggests that producers talk to their agronomist, their nutritionist and, in some cases, to also involve their vet. “The starting point is to decide what you want to achieve. Is it more grazing or more silage? Get your consultants on board and with their help you can work backwards and plan what you need to do to get there.” |

