



The Fertilizer Association of Ireland

The Fertilizer Association of Ireland (FAI) is urging farmers to take immediate and decisive action to restore depleted grazing and silage stocks across farms during the spring and summer of 2023 to avoid a severe fodder shortage next winter.

The call comes following recent revelations from the National Food & Fodder Security Committee (NFFSC) where a stock-take of silage and grazing stocks, particularly across the East and South of Ireland show severely depleted reserves. The situation some farmers find themselves in now can be attributed to several contributing factors:

- An extended period of above average rainfall resulting in a longer than planned winter period.ⁱ
- Fodder stocks on Irish farms are at an extremely low level in East and South of the Country with limited high-cost, low-quality silage available for purchase.ⁱⁱ
- Grass Growth Year to Date being 25% behind previous yearsⁱⁱⁱ
- A reduction of 25% - 30% in fertiliser applications year to date.^{iv}
- Animal numbers have increased in the 12 months to June 2022.^v

Soil Fertility Challenges

It is imperative that each farmer takes stock of soil fertility and firmly grasps the opportunity over the next few weeks to grow next winters fodder requirements. Speaking on the matter, President of the FAI, Dr Tim Shiel said “The Association are concerned that continuous undersupply of appropriate levels of phosphorus, potassium, sulphur and lime to soils already low in fertility will further compound the situation we find ourselves in. Phosphorus applications in 2022 reduced by 24% with potassium applications reducing by 26% in 2022^{vi}. This is on top of a situation where 80% of soils already had inadequate soil fertility.^{vii} High-yielding, high-quality crops of silage cannot be sustained under these conditions”

Fertiliser Prices

The Association recognises that the industry is in a precarious position as input costs remain high while farm gate prices are rapidly declining. With this in mind, the FAI have carried out a cost analysis per tonne of dry matter on Grazed Grass, First Cut Silage, Second Cut Silage and Concentrate Feed. While it is no surprise that Grazed Grass comes in as the cheapest source of feed, what may surprise some is the difference in cost between 1st cut and 2nd cut silage, mainly due to lower average yield later in the season.

Table 1. Comparison of fodder and feed options (Relative cost per kg of DM)

	Grazed Grass	1 st Cut Grass Silage	2 nd Cut Grass Silage	Concentrate Feed
Per Kg Dry Matter	€0.07 ¹²	€0.12 ³	€0.16 ⁴	€0.53 ⁵
Cost vs Grazed Grass	-	1.6	2.2	7.1

While many farmers may be “holding off” for a drop in fertiliser prices, we can see from Table 1 that even with a €100/tonne reduction in the cost of fertiliser for second cut, and a reduced rate, there is still a higher cost per kilogram of dry matter produced owing to the average yield reduction seen on second cut silage crops vs first cut.

¹ Average response of grass to fertiliser taken 25kg grass per 1 kg Nitrogen

² Cost of Nitrogen estimated using CAN = €500

³ Assuming 4bags per ac application of 24:2½:10 @ €650 per tonne

⁴ Assuming 3 bags per ac application of 24:2½:10 @ €550 per tonne

⁵ Assuming €450 per tonne @ 85% Dry Matter





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Recommendations:

1. Find out how much P & K you need to apply to your field over the season:
 - a. If you do not have a field level P & K plan, you can consult the Free Fertilizer Association of Ireland P&K App to understand what requirement your fields have for Phosphorus and Potassium.
 - b. The App is available in all App-stores and can be accessed on the FAI website.
2. Where fertiliser has not been applied to date:
 - a. If very heavy covers (over 2000) are on silage fields and they have not received fertiliser in the last 6 weeks cutting and baling this older grass should be considered.
 - b. This will allow you to apply slurry and fertiliser and achieve a rapid regrowth.
 - c. This crop should be ready to cut a maincrop of silage again in 6 weeks but will not have as much deterioration in the base of the crop.
3. Light covers on silage fields:
 - a. Set a planned cutting date and apply 2 units N/day for each day until cutting.
 - b. Apply up to 50 units of Potassium (K) to ensure that the crop will bulk up especially if low levels of K were used last year.
 - c. Apply Phosphorus (P) based on soil test results and within the confines of the Nitrates Directive.
 - d. Apply at least 10 units of Sulphur per acre to increase nitrogen efficiency and increase grass protein.
4. Where fertiliser has been applied:
 - a. Allow 1 day for every 2 units of Nitrogen applied. E.g., 100 units of Nitrogen applied on April 10th. Allow at least 50 days before harvesting. Plan for harvesting around May 30th
 - b. Test standing crop for sugars and nitrate before harvesting to ensure good ensiling.
5. Carry out a fodder budget:
 - a. Following First Cut Silage, assess if you have enough silage saved for a summer drought and a prolonged winter housing period.
6. Second Cut Silage:
 - a. Apply slurry where available.
 - b. Set a planned cutting date and apply 2 units N/day for each day until cutting allowing for Nitrogen already applied in slurry.
 - c. Apply up to 50 units of Potassium (K) to ensure that the crop will bulk up especially if low levels of K were used last year. Potassium is very important for drought resistance as it regulates the movement and storage of solutes throughout the plant.
 - d. Apply Phosphorus (P) based on soil test results and within the confines of the Nitrates Directive.
 - e. Apply at least 10 units of Sulphur per acre to increase nitrogen efficiency and increase grass protein.
7. Where paddocks are damaged from early grazing:
 - a. Phosphorus is relatively immobile in the soil however it is vital for root development. Root development is required where pasture has been poached.
 - b. At soil index 2 or lower (where permitted under the Nitrates regulations) up to 5 units of P/ac should be applied to promote root (and hence pasture) recovery in the form of a blended N:P:K compound.

End

ⁱ Met Eireann – Increases in Rainfall have meant longer winters and lower fodder stock on farm

- From September 2022 to March 2023 there has been a 19% increase in rainfall recorded at Moorepark Co. Cork.
- A 52% increase in rainfall from September to November in 2022 followed by a 76% increase in rainfall in March 2023 resulted in a 6-month winter across an area of the country which is highly stocked and typically planning for a 4-month winter.





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ii National Food and Fodder Security Committee (NFFSC) meeting on April 13th

- “Supplies (of silage) are very tight in some areas of the east and south, with some farmers – especially those affected by the drought in 2022 - purchasing low quality silage at high costs.”

iii NFFSC - “Grass Growth this year as recorded through PastureBase Ireland has declined by 25% “

iv NFFSC - “Fertiliser application rates have also reduced by 25-30% relative to the previous four years, although slurry applications have been largely up to date from February.”

v CSO Crops and Livestock Provisional June 2022 - The total cattle numbers were up by 37,300 (+0.5%) to 7,396,200. Sheep numbers increased by 358,200 (+6.4%) to 5,967,600.

vi NFFSC - “a reduction in nitrogen fertiliser use of 14% in 2022, while phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) applications declined by 24% and 26%, respectively”

vii NFFSC - “80% of soils in Ireland had inadequate levels of soil fertility in 2022”

