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**INFORMATION FOR DAIRY FARMERS INTERESTED IN PRECISION GRAZING**

**Background**

In Northern Ireland grazed or ensiled grass remains the dominant forage source, occupying an estimated 93% of the total farmed area and with a natural climatic advantage for grass production it is important that we maximise the use of high quality pasture in our dairy production systems. However the average dairy farm in N.I. is estimated to only grow and utilise an average of 7.5 tonnes of dry matter per hectare (t DM/ha). This figure equates to 50% of the yield achievable by modern day grass varieties and suggests a lost opportunity to reduce feed costs and consequently improve net margin. This has been echoed by a continuing decline in milk from forage, which has fallen steadily from 3,228 litres/cow/year in 2000 to 1,686 litres/cow/year in 2015 (CAFRE, 2016). Recent AFBI estimates suggest that by improving grass utilisation by 1t DM/ha and by improving grass quality, an extra profit of £334/ha/year could be realised on the average dairy farm in Northern Ireland.

During 2017, the GrassCheck project ([www.agrisearch.org/GrassCheck](http://www.agrisearch.org/GrassCheck)) has been monitoring grass growth and quality on 12 commercial dairy farms (and 18 beef farms). These dairy farms span a range of land type (from severely disadvantaged areas to lowland), milk output (5000 – 9000 litres/cow) and calving system. Weekly grass growth data is recorded across the grazing platform by the farmers. All farms have displayed high levels of grass growth through the 2017 grazing season, however, there is a wide variability in grass growing conditions present across Northern Ireland and it is important to continue monitoring that this variation and gain a better understanding of the factors contributing to the variations observed.

AgriSearch together with their research partners AFBI have decided to substantially increase the scope of the GrassCheck work by recruiting six new pilot dairy farmers from across Northern Ireland to participate in the new Precision Grazing GrassCheck project in 2018. This project aims to provide high quality grass growth, grass quality and weather information from regions across Northern Ireland to assist farmers in making grass management decisions. The project will also examine the potential use of novel, labour saving precision technologies to assess grass yield and quality.

**What we are looking for?**

AgriSearch (in partnership with AFBI) are seeking to recruit six new dairy farmers from across Northern Ireland to join the study in 2018. Farmers will be expected to measure their grazing platform on a weekly basis throughout the grazing season for the next three production years.

Grass measurements will be fed into an online management platform (AgriNet) along with stock numbers, milk deliveries and details of meal and silage fed to cows.

Every fortnight each farm will submit grass samples to AFBI for analysis. This will be done on a rotating basis with half the farms submitting samples one week and the other half submitting on the following week.

Each farm will be equipped with an automatic weather station which will record temperature, humidity, wind speed and direction, solar radiation and soil moisture. Information will be transmitted wirelessly from the monitoring equipment to a IP logger which will need to be plugged into the farm’s broadband router.

Each farm will be featured in the local press one or two times per year. Pilot farmers will be encouraged to use social media to promote their involvement in the study and their experiences measuring and managing grass. Following 2018, there may also be the opportunity for the pilot farms to engage with new AFBI activity on precision grassland management which aims to use novel technologies to measure grass growth on farm.

We will give preference to farmers who are in a CAFRE Business Development Group and would encourage pilot farms to host a meeting of their business development group during the year. Some of the pilot farmers may be asked to host a larger farm walk during the year.

Applications are particularly welcome from Armagh, North West Londonderry and South Antrim areas.

**Next Steps**

If you wish to apply, download an application form from the AgriSearch website and return via email to elizabeth@agrisearch.org or by post to:

AgriSearch

Innovation Centre

Large Park

Hillsborough

County Down

BT26 6DR

**Deadline**

Applications forms must arrive no later than noon on Monday the 19th ofFebruary 2018.

**Further Information**

If you have any specific queries then contact either Elizabeth Earle (AgriSearch) on 028 9268 1514 or Debbie McConnell (AFBI) on 028 92681530