

INFORMATION FOR FARMERS INTERESTED IN “GRASSCHECK”

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 ruminant production systems. However, the current performance of managed grasslands remains sub-optimal with an estimated 4.1 tonnes of grass dry matter utilised per hectare on beef and sheep farms, significantly behind achievable levels.

With events in recent years resulting in fertiliser prices more than tripling, and concentrate prices doubling for many farmers, the benefits of efficiently utilising high quality grass has never been so important in operating a sustainable and profitable farming system. However, making efficient use of grassland takes careful management and can be challenging in some instances.

The past 12 months has highlighted the wide variability in grass growing conditions present across Northern Ireland and it is important that this variation is monitored and understood. The “Grasscheck” project jointly funded by DAERA and AgriSearch began in 2017 and has been monitoring grass growth and quality over the last 6 growing seasons. As part of this project, AgriSearch is looking to recruit new farms from across Northern Ireland to join the existing Grasscheck farms in the project to measure grass growth and quality across a range of production systems and land types in 2023. This project aims to provide high quality grass growth and grass quality information from regions across Northern Ireland to assist farmers in making grass management decisions.

Who are we are looking for?

AgriSearch (in partnership with AFBI) are seeking to recruit new dairy, beef, and sheep farmers from across Northern Ireland to participate in the project.

We are seeking applications from all farm types in Armagh, North and East Antrim, south Londonderry/North Tyrone and dairy farms in the Fermanagh area to fill gaps in our current network.

In addition we are also looking to recruit farmers from across Northern Ireland who have high levels of clover already present in their swards and who sow low levels of (or no) manufactured N fertiliser.

What is involved in taking part in the GrassCheck project?

Farmers will be expected to measure their grazing platform on a weekly basis throughout the grazing season. Grass measurements will be fed into an online management platform (AgriNet) along with stock numbers, milk production figures, and details of meal and silage fed to cattle. Nutrient applications for all measured grassland will also be recorded regularly.

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.

A number of farms will be equipped with a weather station that will automatically relay data to a control unit connected to Wifi.

GrassCheck farmers will be encouraged to use social media to promote their involvement in the project and their experiences measuring and managing grass. GrassCheck farmers must be willing to participate in knowledge exchange events (farm walks, webinars etc). There may also be an opportunity for farms to engage further with new grassland research projects in the future.

Participating farmers will be paid a maximum of £1,000 per grazing season (based on number of submissions) and will be provided with rising platemeter (if required) and an AgriNet account to upload grass measurements to weekly.

For the Farmer

Farmers will have access to accurate grassland measurement information which they can use to plan grazing rotations and maximise grassland utilisation in the rotation by monitoring for surpluses or deficits which they can remove or prepare for.

Farmers will have access to laboratory testing of grass samples to better understand grass quality on farm, allowing farmers to better plan concentrate and feed rations to maximise grass in the diet.

Next Steps

If you are interested in being involved in the GrassCheck project, please fill out the SurveyMonkey online survey at: <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/NTFDZ2Z>

AgriSearch will be at the Winter Fair if you would like to discuss anything, or have any queries about the project.

Deadline

Applications forms must arrive no later than noon on Monday the 19th of December 2022.

Further Information

If you have any specific queries then contact Jillian Hoy. jillian@agrisearch.org 028 9268 1514