Grazing for Profit and Biodiversity:

Deferred Grazing

SR Farm Advisory Service

National Advice Hub T: 0300 323 0161 E: advice@fas.scot W: www.fas.scot

What is deferred grazing?

Deferred grazing is the practice of setting aside pastures in the summer to allow covers to build up (15+cm) for grazing in the winter.

The system extends the grazing season and provides the opportunity to shorten or eliminate the winter housing period with significantly reduced wintering costs (cost of conserving grass into silage or hay, bedding, manure handling etc).

Shut off date influences yield but also feed value with a Spring/early summer shut off maximising yield but leading to a low quality feed sometimes referred to as 'standing hay'. As such this system is best suited to fit dry cows.

Deferring pastures later in the season, mid-July onwards, following a summer grazing or silage cut, can provide a higher quality feed but at lower yield. This is practiced in some sheep systems with paddock grazing of ewes into the winter known as 'all grass wintering'.

Deferred pasture can be fed as the sole diet or supplemented with conserved forage or concentrates to improve nutrition if required and extend the grazing season if the area of deferred pasture is limiting. Strip or paddock grazing behind electric fencing reduces wastage making the pasture go further into the winter.

Soil type and winter conditions must be assessed with the heavy soils and high rainfall areas not suitable for winter grazing in many cases. Back fencing or paddock grazing to prevent access to grazed areas can be used to minimise poaching.

For more information on deferred grazing see: <u>SRUC Outwintering Strategies for Livestock</u>



Deferred grazing shut off since spring

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Photo credit: Daniel Stout

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Deferred grazing cattle at Tullochgorum

Duncan Miller farms alongside his parents at Tullochgorum in Strathspey where they run 120 Aberdeen Angus cross spring calving suckler cows plus followers with steers sold store and heifers retained or finished.

They got into deferred grazing by chance in 2018 having taken over a 8ha (20ac) block that hadn't been grazed for over 5 years. Too late in the year to make hay from it, Duncan decided to strip graze heifers on it instead. The field carried 15 heifers from 1st December through to the end of March on daily shifts with only mineral buckets as supplement.

"This was a cheap system to run, and they did really well on it. It really opened my eyes to the benefits of deferred grazing." Duncan Miller

This led Duncan to incorporate deferred grazing into the planned wintering system at Tullochgorum in 2021 with a 6ha (15ac) block shut off from mid-July. This provided a standing crop measured at 4tDM/ha to be grazed by 30 dry cows.

Feed analysis results found the deferred pasture, sampled on 8th December, to be a good quality feed (10.8 ME, 16.9% CP) which was in fact superior to the silage (~40% of diet) that was being fed alongside (9.24 ME, 11% CP). Feed quality of the deferred pasture will have reduced as winter progressed.

Duncan provided the cows with a fresh allocation each day on a strip grazing system with a bale of silage rolled out every second day, half for that day and other half behind the wire for the next day.



Deferred pasture at Tullochgorum in early December

Photo credit: Duncan Miller

Tullochgorum having light free draining soil made it ideal for outwintering cattle without causing excessive poaching, so much so that Duncan didn't need to use a back wire. Shown in the left hand side of the below photo there was very limited animal impact with no concerns about poaching.

The 6ha field, supplemented with 35 bales of silage, carried the 30 cows from 1st December through into early February with substantial cost savings:

40 bales of silage at £25/bale = £1,000

60 bales of straw at £11/bale = £660

Total savings in feed and bedding = £1,660 = £55 per cow over 2 months.

In addition to the above there was also significant savings in housing costs with no machinery, fuel or labour required for bedding out or for handling and spreading the resulting dung.

Going into winter 2022, Duncan, aiming to further reduce cattle wintering costs and improve farm profitability has had all cattle on a rotational grazing system to extend the grazing season on the main grazing platform.

Cows with calves at foot will then move on to deferred grazing in November across several blocks of deferred pasture totalling 35ha. Calves are to be weaned in January with calves housed and cows staying out on deferred pasture and silage until housing at calving.



Cows on a new break at Tullochgorum in mid-January

Photo credit: Duncan Miller

Biodiversity benefits

By building rest into the system and keeping cattle outside during the winter, deferred grazing can bring a multitude of benefits for biodiversity:

- If deferred from spring/early summer plants are able to flower and set seed. This leads to an increase in floral diversity and abundance providing a valuable food source for flower visiting insects whilst seeds provide winter feed for birds and small mammals.
- The long rest period allows plants to express their growth habit creating structural diversity in the sward. This creates habitat for wildlife including insects and spiders and shelter for birds and small mammals in the winter.
- Allowing plants to reproduce and fully set seed can promote the presence and abundance of species that may otherwise not be seen under a short grazed system. Leading to potential for improved sward diversity and nature value.
- Heavy covers can on the other hand be a negative for certain small plants so care must be taken that practises such as deferred grazing that alter species diversity are in tune with a given farms biodiversity objectives.
- Outwintering provides dung for dung beetles, many of which are winter active and in need of habitat and food sources that are not available when cows are housed. Promoting dung beetles also has a knock on effect for soil health and provides a valuable food source for birds that feed on the beetles and their larvae during the winter months.
- Increased rooting depth and diversity, combined with increased nutrient cycling can lead to improved soil microbial activity, worm populations and soil health.



Deferred grazing in flower

Author:

Daniel Stout, SAC Consulting

With thanks to:

Duncan Miller, Tullochgorum Farm

Nikki Yoxall, Pasture for Life



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