

## INFORMATION FOR DAIRY FARMERS INTERESTED IN GRASSCHECK

Thank you for your interest in becoming a GrassCheck Pilot Dairy Farmer.

### 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 current performance of managed grasslands remains sub-optimal with an estimated 7.5 tonnes of grass dry matter utilised per hectare on dairy farms, significantly behind achievable levels. 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).

The Sustainable Agricultural Land Management Strategy for Northern Ireland has called for an increase in the uptake of sward assessment and grass utilisation measurement on grassland farms as one measure by which improvements in grassland utilisation can be achieved. A recent study carried out by AFBI demonstrated that improving grassland utilisation by one tonne per hectare on a dairy farm is worth an additional profit of £441/ha/year.

GrassCheck is AgriSearch's longest running programme. The format has altered over the years, however, measurements have always been taken from grass plots at Greenmount and Hillsborough which are fed into a weekly report for the benefit of farmers. The results from GrassCheck were used as evidence for the 2002 weather aid and the 2013 fodder transport scheme.

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. AgriSearch together with their research partners AFBI have decided to substantially increase the scope of the GrassCheck project by recruiting twelve pilot dairy farmers from across Northern Ireland to participate in the project in 2017. 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.

### What we are looking for?

AgriSearch (in partnership with AFBI) are seeking to recruit twelve dairy farmers from across Northern Ireland (two per county) to participate in the study.

Farmers will be expected to measure their grazing platform on a weekly basis throughout the grazing season. Grass measurements will be fed into a 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 2017, there will 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 BDG during the year. Some of the pilot farmers may be asked to host a larger farm walk during the year.

While we are ideally looking for two farms per county if we are not able to recruit two farms from a county who meet the minimum criteria we reserve the right to alter this if it should prove necessary.

**Next Steps**

If you wish to apply, download an application form from the AgriSearch website and return via email to [jason@agrisearch.org](mailto:jason@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 Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> January 2017.

**Further Information**

If you have any specific queries then contact either Jason Rankin (AgriSearch) on 028 9268 1613 or Debbie McConnell (AFBI) on 028 92681530