



GrassCheck 2026-2028
Farmer Participant Handbook



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Key People



Name: John Morrow

Role: Agriculture Manager

Responsibility: Project lead, farmer advice, Knowledge Exchange delivery.....

Contact

Email: john@agrisearch.org



Name: Courtney Colgan

Role: Agriculture Officer

Responsibility: farmer support, data collation, project administration, KE support.....

Contact

- Email: courtney@agrisearch.org



Name: Jasmine Morton

Role: Communications Officer

Responsibility: Photography and communications on social media, website....

Contact

- Email: jasmine@agrisearch.org

Introduction

Grassland: Northern Ireland's Competitive Advantage

Our mild, moist climate provides a significant comparative advantage over many other ruminant production systems globally. The ability to grow high yields of quality grass across a relatively long grazing season enables milk and meat to be produced efficiently,

sustainably and at comparatively low cost.

Maximising the growth, utilisation and management of grazed grass is therefore central to maintaining the competitiveness, resilience and long-term sustainability of Northern Ireland's dairy and livestock sectors.

However, despite the well-established benefits of grass-based milk and meat production, many Northern Ireland livestock farms are not currently optimising grass growth or utilisation.

Significant variation exists between farms in grass measurement, grazing management, nutrient use efficiency and overall pasture performance. In many cases, limited measurement, inconsistent data collection and insufficient benchmarking mean that grass — the farm's lowest-cost feed — is under-measured, under-managed and therefore under-utilised.

This gap between potential and performance represents a major opportunity. Improving grassland management is one of the most cost-effective and environmentally responsible ways to enhance farm profitability, reduce reliance on purchased feed, improve nutrient efficiency and strengthen the long-term sustainability of the sector.

GrassCheck: The Solution

The GrassCheck Programme has been established to close the gap between potential and performance.

Through structured measurement, consistent data recording and active knowledge exchange, GrassCheck enables farmers to make informed, evidence-based decisions that improve grass growth, utilisation and overall farm performance.

Project Objectives

Demonstrate

Demonstrate best-practice grassland management on commercial Northern Ireland farms by:

- Measuring and quantifying grass grown and utilised on farm.
- Optimising average farm cover throughout the grazing season, alongside pre- and post-grazing residuals.
- Maximising annual paddock grazing rotations to increase total dry matter production
- Increasing total days at grass to reduce reliance on housed feeding
- Improving soil health — chemical, physical and biological — through regular soil testing and optimal nutrient management.
- Strengthening grassland infrastructure (paddock design, roadways and water systems) to increase accessibility, utilisation and grass grown.
- Improving sward composition through effective reseeding strategies and incorporating legumes where appropriate.
- Providing real commercial farm examples that demonstrate profitable, data-driven decision-making.

Record

Record high-quality, consistent and timely farm data to support on-farm decision-making and research by:

- Measuring grass growth and utilisation weekly.
- Recording livestock stocking rate, diet and nutrient applications.
- Contributing robust datasets to improve forecasting, modelling and scientific research.
- Supporting annual benchmarking to drive continuous performance improvement.

Knowledge Exchange

Facilitate meaningful knowledge exchange across the Northern Ireland farming sector by:

- Hosting farm walks to demonstrate practical management in action.
- Sharing results through written press and technical articles.
- Producing social media videos to communicate key messages in an accessible format.
- Contributing to podcasts and interviews to broaden reach and discussion.
- Presenting findings at conferences and industry events.
- Take part in peer-to-peer learning through discussion groups and training events.

Improved Farm Sustainability

Through demonstrating, recording and exchanging knowledge, the programme strengthens the sustainability of Northern Ireland farm businesses across three interconnected pillars:

Financial Sustainability

- Increased utilisation of home-grown forage
- Reduced reliance on purchased feed
- Improved margin and business resilience

Environmental Sustainability

- Improved nutrient use efficiency
- Reduced emissions intensity per unit of output
- More resilient grass-based systems in response to climatic variability

Social Sustainability

- Increased farmer confidence and skills
- Stronger collaboration across the sector
- Enhanced long-term viability of family farm businesses

Data collection and recording protocol

Participating farmers shall record the following weekly throughout the grazing season beginning approximately March of each year for 32-35 weeks depending on weather conditions:

Measure grass weekly during the grazing season

- Paddocks to be measured weekly
- Following plate meter grass measuring protocol in 5.1
- Any paddock grazed/cut during the week must also have pre- and post-cover measured and recorded.

Record weekly on AgriNet by Midnight Monday of each week:

- Weekly Paddock covers
- Weekly pre and post grazing/silage covers
- Stock numbers and liveweights
- Diet (grass, silage, concentrates)
- Fertiliser and manure/slurry applications per paddock
- Milk yield, fat and protein (where applicable)
- Paddocks removed for reseeding or silage

Sample and post grass quality samples on Mondays of farmers selected week:

- The designated sampling group will be confirmed on the previous Friday where applicable.
- Dairy farms: fortnightly
- Beef/Sheep farms: every four weeks
- See Grass Quality Sampling Protocol 5.2

Participating farmers shall also participate in annual Physical, Financial and Environmental benchmarking exercises.

All data must be accurate and submitted within agreed timeframes.

Plate meter Protocol

Participating Farmers shall use to the following grass measurement protocol unless the cut-and-weigh method has been agreed in advance with AgriSearch staff.

- Measure the entire grazing block once per week during the grazing season
- Long-term silage ground should be excluded
- All paddocks within the grazing platform must be measured
- A minimum of 30 plate meter drops per paddock must be taken
- Measurements shall be taken while walking the paddock in a “W” pattern to ensure representative sampling
- Use the following plate meter formula: $\text{Height} * 124 + 608$ (Height is in clicks, 1 click= 0.5cm)
 - How to change your formula, can be found [391576_20ff1f37d4b24658a6f8464b73bdda58.pdf](#)

Grass Sampling Protocol

Where scheduled to sample:

- Sample the next paddock due to be grazed
- Walk the paddock in a “W” pattern
- Take five (5) × 30 cm strip cuts
- Before each strip cut, count a random number of steps to avoid bias
- Cut grass to post-grazing height
- Combine and mix all strip cuts thoroughly to create one representative sample
- Place the mixed sample in the prepaid bag provided
- Post the sample on Monday

Laboratory results will be issued via email on Thursday or Friday of that week.

Weather Station

Where a weather station has been installed on the Participant's farm, the following conditions shall apply:

Connectivity and Operation

The Participant shall:

- Keep the weather station IP logger continuously plugged into their internet router or connected to their Wi-Fi network, as applicable
- Take all reasonable steps to ensure uninterrupted data transmission
- Notify AgriSearch staff immediately if the Participant suspects any malfunction, inaccurate readings or data irregularities
- Cooperate fully with SkyLink (or appointed technical support provider) to facilitate required maintenance, servicing, troubleshooting or software updates

Failure to maintain connectivity or cooperate with maintenance requirements may result in interruption of data collection and may result in the weather station being relocated to another GrassCheck farm.

Maintenance and Protection

The Participant shall:

- Take all reasonable measures to protect the weather station from livestock damage
- Maintain fencing or protective barriers surrounding the station
- Notify AgriSearch staff immediately of any damage, malfunction or interruption in operation
- Inform AgriSearch in advance if the station requires relocation and allow AgriSearch staff to assist with removal or reinstallation

The Participant shall not move, dismantle or alter the equipment without prior agreement.

Biosecurity and Farm Visits

AgriSearch and AFBI recognise the importance of maintaining high biosecurity standards across all participating farms.

AgriSearch/AFBI Responsibilities

AgriSearch/AFBI staff and authorised representatives shall:

- Take reasonable biosecurity precautions when visiting farms
- Wear clean clothing and footwear
- Use disinfectant footbaths or other hygiene measures where appropriate
- Comply with any site-specific biosecurity instructions provided by the Participant

Participant Responsibilities

The Participant shall:

- Inform AgriSearch/AFBI of any known disease outbreak, movement restriction or heightened biosecurity risk on the farm
- Provide clear guidance on any specific biosecurity procedures required on the holding
- Ensure safe access to the farm for authorised visitors

Equipment

Any equipment supplied to the Participant for use in the research and development programme shall remain the sole property of AgriSearch.

The Participant agrees to:

- Use the equipment solely for the purposes of the GrassCheck Programme
- Take reasonable care of all equipment supplied
- Not sell, transfer, modify or dispose of the equipment without prior written consent
- Return the equipment in reasonable working condition (allowing for fair wear and tear) upon request or at the conclusion of the programme

The Participant may be liable for repair or replacement costs where equipment is lost, deliberately damaged or negligently maintained.

Media, Photography and Publicity Consent

Consent to Record

As part of the GrassCheck Programme, AgriSearch/AFBI may:

- Take photographs on the farm
- Record video footage
- Conduct audio recordings (including podcasts and interviews)
- Capture drone footage (where applicable and compliant with aviation regulations)

Such recordings may include images of:

- The Participant
- Farm staff (with their consent)
- Livestock
- Farm infrastructure and land
-

Use of Media

The Participant grants AgriSearch/AFBI the right to use photographs, video, audio recordings and related media content for the purposes of:

- Knowledge exchange activities
- Promotion of the GrassCheck Programme
- Educational and training materials
- Publication on the AgriSearch website
- Social media channels
- Press articles and industry publications
- Podcasts and webinars
- Conference presentations and events

Identification

No personal contact details or sensitive personal information will be published.

Where the Participant is identifiable in media content, such use shall be:

- Professional in nature
- Relevant to programme objectives
- Not misleading or defamatory

AgriSearch will act reasonably in representing the Participant and their farm.

Participation

The Participant shall:

- Attend programme meetings, training events and discussion groups as required
- Engage constructively in peer-to-peer learning activities
- Share relevant management experiences and performance insights with the group

Knowledge Exchange Activities

The Participant agrees, where reasonably requested, to contribute to knowledge exchange activities including:

- Farm walks
- Technical presentations
- Written press articles
- Case studies
- Social media videos
- Podcasts and interviews
- Conference participation

Hosting of Farm Walks

The Participant acknowledges that hosting farm walks is an important component of the programme's demonstration objectives.

Where selected to host a farm walk, the Participant agrees to:

- Provide reasonable access to the farm
- Present and discuss grassland management practices
- Cooperate with AgriSearch in the planning and organisation of the event

AgriSearch WhatsApp Groups Policy

Purpose:

This group is strictly for AgriSearch committee business. Use it to discuss R&D proposals, plan and coordinate upcoming events, confirm meeting dates and agendas, share relevant documents, and follow up on agreed actions. Please keep messages focused, clear, and directly related to committee work.

Rules:

1. **Confidentiality:** Do not share screenshots, contact details or group discussions outside the group without permission.
2. **Stay on Topic:** Messages must relate directly to AgriSearch committee work (R&D proposals, events, meetings, follow-ups).
3. **Keep Messages Clear & Brief:** Share information concisely and avoid long unrelated discussions.
4. **No Off-Topic Chat:** Social chat, jokes, and unrelated news should be kept out of this group.
5. **Share Documents Clearly:** Label files, links, or updates so everyone understands the purpose.
6. **Respect Working Hours:** If possible, avoid non-urgent messages outside normal working hours

Additional guidelines in respect of GrassCheck WhatsApp Groups

- a) **No Commercial Promotion:** The group must not be used for advertising products or services. No marketing or promotional messages without prior agreement from AgriSearch.
- b) **Advice Disclaimer:** Information shared within the group represents individual experiences and opinions. Only advice explicitly issued by authorised AgriSearch/AFBI staff should be considered formal technical guidance.