

## Starting A Rotational Grazing System

Like everything new starting a rotational grazing system raises many questions. However unlike many other changes in production it requires minimal capital investment so in the unlikely situation that you decide it doesn't suit your business there is no major loss. The following is a brief guide to some of the questions which might be raised –

1. Which field(s)? On units with several adjacent small fields each field can act as a single paddock with perhaps 1 or 2 of the largest just split with a temporary electric fence. On larger farms the approach might be to set up the system in one large field, using internal electric fences to make the paddocks.
2. How many paddocks? The ideal is sufficient paddocks so that stock can be moved into a new paddock daily ie somewhere between 21 – 28. However initially 6 – 8 paddocks will be sufficient.
3. Layout of paddocks. The ideal is a circular layout so stock never return/pass through a paddock until when it is ready for regrazing ie about 3 weeks after it has been grazed.
4. Fences. All fences must be electrified. For cattle a single strand at around 3 foot high should be sufficient but for sheep, particularly with lambs at foot 3 wires might be needed.

(Stock must be trained to electric fences before they are turned out, particularly cattle. When stock are first turned out they tend to gallop around the whole field and can quickly demolish electric fences which are not particularly visible to them. The simplest way to train them is a week before turnout to erect a short length of electric fence across the corner of their winter pens so they experience a shock without being able to run through and break the wire.)

5. Water. Every paddock must have a water supply. Reasonable sized troughs should be able to service 4 paddocks. Depending on the size/number of stock it may be necessary to move the electric fence over the water trough, every time stock are moved.
6. Stocking rate. Initial stocking rates will depend upon the stock and the fertility of the field. It is also important to remember that paddock grazing produces more grass and will support higher stocking rates compared with set stocking a field. The following table gives a guide to stocking rates with productive, well fertilised grass.

Stock	Maximum Group Size	Overall Numbers/Ha	Total Area (Ha)**
Growing cattle	100	7	14
Finishing cattle	80	4	20
Ewes and singles	250	21	12
Ewes and twins	300	17	17
Spring calving cows and calves	50	3.5	14
Autumn calving cows and calves <sup>+</sup>	60	2.2	27

7. Type of stock. All classes of cattle and sheep can be rotationally grazed but will require different proportions of the area to be conserved. Stock requiring the lowest proportion (< 15%) of the grazing area needing to be conserved would include ewes and lambs, cows and calves and grass finishing cattle. Growing cattle will require bigger areas to be conserved, the proportion increasing the lighter the animal at turnout. For example using 200 kg stores around 50% of the grassland may initially need to be conserved but only around 30% for 400 kg stores.

8. When to turnout. The target is to turn stock onto the paddocks ASAP. Ideally just a proportion of the stock should initially be turned out with numbers increasing as grass growth improves. An early turnout does mean stock will initially be short of grass but it will have extremely high feed value so that in terms of daily energy and protein intakes it will almost certainly be superior to the alternative winter ration.
9. Rotation. The ideal is a rotation of between 21 – 24 days (21 = 3 day x 7 paddocks, 24 = 4 days x 6 paddocks). Ideally every paddock should have a minimum of 18 days in which to regrow and replenish root reserves before being regrazed.
10. Management. If grass in the next paddock is over 10 inches, skip the next 1 – 2 paddocks so stock are turned onto grass at the right height ie just under 10 inches. The ungrazed paddocks should be cut for silage immediately. The objective is not to take a good crop of silage but to ensure high quality grazing in a few weeks time.  
If stock are due to be moved but there is 3 inches or more of grass still in the paddock delay moving them until the following day.
11. Moving paddocks. Try and develop a routine eg always check them in the morning and only move them in the afternoon. This will help keep them calmer, avoid them becoming agitated and expecting to be moved onto fresh grass every time they see a human.

It may also help to use different clothing, vehicles for moving v checking.

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