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**A STUDY ON THE EFFECT OF SWARD  
CONDITIONS ON HERBAGE ACCUMULATION  
DURING WINTER AND SPRING.**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Applied Science in Plant Science at  
Massey University

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## ABSTRACT

Recently there has been an increased trend for farmers to adopt farm systems that operate at a reduced stocking rate, with the aim to improve per hectare production through achieving higher production per cow. The emphasis of these farming systems is on improving cow intakes and production and increasing herbage accumulation through the maintenance of pasture conditions with emphasis on pasture quality and higher post grazing residuals. A key issue at the centre of such a grazing system is whether the increase in pasture accumulation will outweigh the decrease in pasture utilisation at the time of grazing, thus increasing overall efficiency. The objectives of this study were to measure the effect of herbage mass present after grazing on subsequent net herbage accumulation rate, and to explain these differences through monitoring changes in sward components, as well as discussing the practical implications of these within a dairy farming system.

Two experiments were conducted on a commercial dairy farm near Dannevirke in 1998, Experiment I over winter (June 19 – August 28) and Experiment II in spring (September 18 – October 28). The farm was situated approximately 300m A.S.L, with the soil type being a combination of an Ashhurst stony silt loam and a Dannevirke silt loam, with high soil fertility levels. Treatments involved a range of post-grazing residuals representing cow intake levels from under fed to ad-lib (900, 1200, 1500, 1800, 2100 kg DM/ha in winter and 1200, 1500 1800 2100 kg DM/ha in spring, Treatments 1-5 and 1-4 respectively). The spring experiment also involved nitrogen treatments at rates of 0, 25 and 50 kg N/ha. Heifers and dry cows were used to graze plots with grazing intensities calculated for stock to reach the targeted residuals in 24 hours (Experiment I) and 8 hours (Experiment II). Experiment I was designed as a randomised complete block design, and Experiment II as a randomised split plot design. Both experiments were replicated three times.

In both experiments a range of post-grazing residuals was achieved (870, 1140, 1394, 1635, 1917 in Experiment I, and 1098 1424, 1704, 1913 in Experiment II). Post-grazing residuals in both experiments were significantly different ( $P < 0.05$ ).

A post-grazing residual of 1394 and 1704 kg DM/ha in winter and spring respectively resulted in the greatest net herbage accumulation rates (16.3 and 81.7 kg DM/ha/day) from grazing

until a pre-grazing target level of 2600-2700 kg DM/ha was achieved. Net herbage accumulation rates measured in both experiments were higher than those used in practice on the case farm. No statistical differences existed in Experiment I. In Experiment II Treatment 3 (1704 kg DM/ha residual) was significantly ( $P<0.05$ ) higher than the other treatments. The relationship between herbage mass and net herbage accumulation rate showed a positive trend in both experiments. The herbage mass at which pasture accumulation was optimised was greater in spring (2900 kg DM/ha) than winter (2500 kg DM/ha).

In both Experiments tiller density was greater in more intensely grazed swards, and showed a compensation effect with tiller weight. In Experiment I all treatments increased in tiller density with Treatment 1 having a significantly greater ( $P<0.05$ ) increase than the other treatments. In Experiment II tiller density in all swards declined over the entire experiment, being greatest ( $P<0.01$ ) in Treatment 3. Leaf extension rates had a similar trend to tiller weight in Experiment I with the laxer treatments (Treatments 3-5) having a significantly higher ( $P<0.01$ ) extension rate than Treatments 1 and 2. Treatment 3 also had the fastest leaf appearance rate (17.1 days/leaf), although this was only statistically different to Treatment 5. Leaf appearance rates in Experiment II showed no trend, with Treatments 2 and 4 having the fastest appearance rates, and Treatment 3 the slowest. Tiller appearance rates showed some evidence of a trend (although not significant) with more intensely grazed swards tending to have a slightly faster appearance rate compared to more laxly grazed swards.

Tiller weight and leaf extension rate were significantly correlated ( $P<0.05$ ) to net herbage accumulation in winter. In spring all sward components measured were correlated ( $P<0.01$ ) to net herbage accumulation with leaf appearance rate being the most significant ( $P<0.001$ ).

Botanical composition in Experiment I showed that more intensely grazed plots had a greater ( $P<0.05$ ) proportion of leaf, lower proportion of dead material and higher clover content. In Experiment II the trend between variables and grazing level was similar but not significant. The proportion of clover and dead material in spring swards was low (averaging 9.8 and 14.9% respectively) given the herbage mass levels reached. NIR results in general reflected the changes in botanical composition.

It was concluded that there is benefit in the use of sward conditions (targets) in the planning and management of grazing systems in enhancing both pasture and animal performance.

Compensatory effects between sward components resulted in non-significant differences in herbage accumulation rates, and in practice, differences in pasture growth are likely to occur at extreme grazing residuals. Grazing management decisions are therefore more likely to be based on residual dry matter to achieve desired intakes for high per cow production, high pasture utilisation and high pasture quality, rather than to optimise pasture accumulation. It is recommended that residual herbage mass after grazing should be 1200-1300 kg DM/ha and 1500-1600 kg DM/ha in winter and spring respectively. The practical implications of these are discussed.

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# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	ii
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	v
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	vii
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	xi
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	xiv
<b>List of Plates</b> .....	xvii
<b>1.0 Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>2.0 Review of Literature</b> .....	4
2.1 Introduction.....	4
2.2 Plant Physiology.....	5
2.2.1 Overview.....	5
2.2.2 Photosynthesis.....	7
2.3 Plant Morphology.....	12
2.4 Tiller Dynamics.....	16
2.4.1 The seasonality of tiller production.....	16
2.4.2 Tiller survival.....	20
2.5 The Effects of Defoliation.....	22
2.5.1 Physiology of defoliation.....	22
2.5.2 Morphology of defoliation.....	23
2.6 Growth of Pasture.....	26
2.7 Herbage Mass and Pasture Growth.....	27
2.8 Systems Trial.....	37
2.9 Conclusion.....	29
<b>3.0 Experimental Outline and Methods</b> .....	43
3.1 Experimental Sites.....	43
3.2 Experimental Outline.....	43
3.3 Experiment I: Experimental Design.....	44



3.3.1	Treatments.....	44
3.3.2	Treatment layout.....	44
3.4	Experiment II: Experimental Design.....	48
3.4.1	Treatments.....	48
3.4.2	Treatment layout.....	48
3.5	Measurements.....	51
3.5.1	Introduction.....	51
3.5.2	Herbage mass.....	52
3.5.3	Net herbage accumulation (NHA).....	53
3.5.4	Botanical composition.....	53
3.5.5	Nutritive value.....	53
3.5.6	Tiller density.....	54
3.5.7	Tiller weight.....	54
3.5.8	Leaf appearance rate.....	55
3.5.9	Leaf extension rate.....	56
3.6	Statistical Analysis.....	58
<b>4.0</b>	<b>Results: Experiment I.....</b>	<b>59</b>
4.1	Plate Meter Calibration.....	59
4.2	Post Grazing Herbage Mass.....	60
4.3	Herbage Mass.....	63
4.4	Herbage Mass Profile.....	64
4.5	Net Herbage Accumulation (NHA).....	67
4.6	Tiller Density.....	69
4.7	Tiller Weight.....	70
4.8	Leaf Extension Rate.....	72
4.9	Leaf Appearance Rate.....	73
4.9.1	Tiller appearance rate.....	75
4.10	Botanical Composition.....	76
4.11	Near Infrared Reflectance (NIR).....	80
<b>5.0</b>	<b>Results: Experiment II.....</b>	<b>82</b>
5.1	Plate Meter Calibration.....	82

5.2 Post Grazing Herbage Mass.....	83
5.3 Herbage Mass.....	86
5.4 Herbage Mass Profile.....	87
5.5 Net Herbage Accumulation (NHA).....	90
5.6 Tiller Density.....	92
5.7 Tiller Weight.....	93
5.8 Leaf Appearance Rate.....	94
5.8.1 Tiller appearance rate.....	95
5.9 Botanical Composition.....	96
5.10 Near Infrared Reflectance (NIR).....	99
<b>6.0 Discussion.....</b>	<b>102</b>
6.1 Introduction.....	102
6.2 Net Herbage Accumulation.....	102
6.3 Plate Meter Calibration.....	122
6.4 Herbage Mass Profile.....	125
6.4.1 Effect of grazing residuals on animal intake.....	127
6.5 Leaf Appearance and Leaf Extension.....	129
6.5.1 Leaf appearance rate.....	129
6.5.2 Tiller appearance rate.....	132
6.5.3 Leaf extension rate.....	134
6.6 Tiller Density and Tiller Weight.....	135
6.6.1 Tiller density.....	135
6.6.2 Tiller weight.....	138
6.7 Interaction of Component Measurements.....	139
6.7.1 Winter.....	139
6.7.2 Spring.....	142
6.8 Botanical Composition.....	143
6.8.1 Clover.....	143
6.8.2 Dead matter.....	145
6.8.3 Grass leaf and stem.....	147
6.9 Pasture Quality.....	150

<b>7.0 Practical Implications</b> .....	155
7.1 Practical Implications for Farm Management.....	155
7.1.1 Winter.....	155
7.1.2 Spring.....	157
7.2 Summary.....	161
<b>8.0 Conclusion</b> .....	163
<b>9.0 References</b> .....	166
<b>10.0 Appendices</b> .....	187
Appendix 1: Location of Study.....	187
Appendix 2a: Cow numbers - Experiment I.....	188
Appendix 2b: Cow numbers - Experiment II.....	190
Appendix 3a: Herbage mass profile - Experiment I.....	192
Appendix 3b: Herbage mass profile – Experiment II.....	193
Appendix 4: Climatic data.....	194
Appendix 5: Pasture regrowth trends.....	196

## List of Tables

Table 2.1. Plant Factors that influence plant growth.....	9
Table 2.2. Tiller density (tillers/m <sup>2</sup> ) of ryegrass/white clover swards under contrasting spring grazing management (Hernandez-Garay et al 1993).....	16
Table 2.3. Effects of stocking rate on ryegrass tiller density (000/m <sup>2</sup> ) (L’Huillier 1987b)	19
Table 2.4. Average net herbage accumulation rates of a ryegrass/white clover sward from October to mid February (Korte & Sheath 1978).....	26
Table 2.5. Average pre & post grazing levels and pasture growth rates (Holmes & McLenaghan 1980).....	32
Table 2.6. The effect of winter grazing treatment on pasture regrowth (kg DM/ha in weeks 0-3 and 3-6. (Clark et al 1994).....	36
Table 2.7. The effect of winter grazing management on milksolids, liveweight change and average farm cover for period 1 (16 July-3 Sept) and period 2 (3 Spet-22Oct), (Clark et al 1994).....	36
Table 2.8. Milk production and use of supplements fed and conserved for different farmlet systems (Dillon et al 1995).....	38
Table 2.9. Average herbage allowance, intakes and residual herbage yields (Glasse et al 1980).....	38
Table 3.1. Cow numbers and grazing intensities for Experiment I.....	46
Table 3.2. Cow numbers and grazing intensities for Experiment II.....	49
Table 4.1. Experiment I - Pre-grazing yields and target vs actual post grazing residuals (kg DM/ha) .....	60
Table 4.2. Experiment I - Total Herbage accumulation over experimental period.....	64
Table 4.3. Experiment I - Treatment means and coefficient of variation from herbage mass profiles - average of all blocks.....	64
Table 4.4. Experiment I - Average NHA rates for treatments over experimental period.....	67
Table 4.5. Experiment I - Coefficient of variation between treatments for mean NHA rate over experimental period.....	69
Table 4.6. Experiment I - Tiller density at each measurement period.....	70
Table 4.7. Experiment I - Net gain in tiller density from grazing until 28 August.....	70
Table 4.8. Experiment I - Tiller weight (mg DM/tiller) at each measurement period.....	71
Table 4.9. Experiment I - Average rates of leaf elongation rate.....	72

Table 4.10. Experiment I - Average leaf appearance rates (days/tiller) over experimental period.....	74
Table 4.11. Experiment I - Average number of daughter tillers and their leaves that emerged from marked tillers over experimental period.....	75
Table 4.12. Experiment I - Comparison of ratios of grass stem vs grass leaf, green vs dead material, and grass vs clover averaged over the experimental period.....	79
Table 4.13. Experiment I - Average percentage of grass stem, grass leaf, dead matter, clover and weeds of swards over the experimental period.....	80
Table 4.14. Experiment I - Average values measured by NIR for each treatment over experimental period (mg/g).....	81
Table 5.1. Experiment II - Pre-grazing yields and target vs actual post grazing residuals (kg DM/ha).....	83
Table 5.2. Experiment II - Total Herbage accumulation over experimental period.....	87
Table 5.3. Experiment II - Treatment means and coefficient of variation from herbage mass profiles - average of all blocks.....	89
Table 5.4. Experiment II - Average NHA rates for grazing treatments over experimental period.....	90
Table 5.5. Experiment II - Average NHA rates for nitrogen treatments over experimental period.....	92
Table 5.6. Experiment II - Tiller density at each measurement period.....	92
Table 5.7. Experiment II - Net gain in tiller density from grazing until 29 October.....	93
Table 5.8. Experiment II - Tiller weight (mg DM/tiller) at each measurement period.....	94
Table 5.9. Experiment II - Average leaf appearance rates over experimental period.....	94
Table 5.10. Experiment II - Average number of daughter tillers and there leaves that emerged from marked tillers over experimental period.....	96
Table 5.11. Experiment II- Average percentage of grass stem, grass leaf, dead matter, clover and weeds of treatment swards over the experimental period.....	98
Table 5.12. Experiment II - Comparison of ratios of grass stem vs grass leaf, green vs dead material, and grass vs clover averaged over the experimental period.....	99
Table 5.13. Experiment II - Average values measured by NIR for each treatment over experimental period (mg/g).....	100
Table 6.1. Pasture responses to applied nitrogen plots (kg DM/ha/kg N).....	103
Table 6.2. Rotation length and average NHA for treatments until a pre-grazing level of 2700 kg DM/ha was reached.....	106

Table 6.3. Rates of NHA over different periods of regrowth for both experiments.....	107
Table 6.4. Correlation coefficients between pasture characteristics and net herbage accumulation.....	111
Table 6.5. Experiment I - PCA analysis of pre and post-grazing and regrowth measurements made.....	113
Table 6.6. Experiment I - Means of individual component coefficients from the first PC...	115
Table 6.7. Experiment II - PCA analysis of measurements made during sward regrowth....	117
Table 6.8. Experiment I - Dry matter allowance, intake levels and estimated level of pasture utilisation from treatments.....	128
Table 6.9. Experiment II - Dry matter allowance, intake levels and estimated level of pasture utilisation from treatments.....	128
Table 6.10. Difference in average leaf appearance rates (days/tiller) between treatments for both experiments.....	131
Table 6.11. Average proportions of grass stem, grass leaf, dead matter, clover and weeds across all treatments in winter and spring.....	145
Table 6.12. NIR results (average of all treatments) compared with recommended values (%).....	151

## List of Figures

Figure 2.1. The determinants of plant growth.....	6
Figure 2.2. Factors affecting the conversion of light into carbon.....	9
Figure 2.3. Factors affecting the partitioning of carbon within plants.....	10
Figure 2.4. Factors affecting the interception of light.....	13
Figure 2.5. The relationship between pasture cover and tiller population density for a ryegrass sward at Palmerston North. The dotted line showing a potential loss in productivity (Matthew et al 1996).....	15
Figure 2.6. Tiller population turnover in a Nui ryegrass sward at Palmerston North (Korte 1986).....	18
Figure 2.7. Tiller appearance and death rates for a ryegrass sward (Korte 1986).....	18
Figure 2.8. Photosynthetic responses to increasing CO <sub>2</sub> supply under competitive situations.....	21
Figure 2.9. The relationship between morphogenetic and sward structural characteristics (Chapman & Lemaire).....	24
Figure 2.10. Logistic curve for total herbage and ryegrass yields for four dates of spelling (Brougham 1957).....	28
Figure 2.11. The relationship between herbage accumulation rate and pasture cover, may to August, No 4 Dairy, Massey University (Matthews et al 1995).....	30
Figure 2.12. Herbage growth, net herbage production and decay versus pasture mass (Bircham & Hodgson).....	30
Figure 2.13. Growth rate of treatment swards over time (Holmes & McLenaghan 1980)...	33
Figure 2.14 A model which illustrates the corresponding changes in the instantaneous growth rate ( $dW/dt$ ), the weight of the crop ( $W$ ) and the average growth rate ( $(W-W_0)/t$ ) (Parsons & Penning 1988).....	35
Figure 3.1. Experimental site.....	45
Figure 3.2. Layout of Experiment I.....	47
Figure 3.3. Layout of Experiment II.....	50
Figure 4.1. Experiment I - Calibration equation of rising plate meter.....	59
Figure 4.2. Experiment I - Change in herbage mass over time.....	63
Figure 4.3. Experiment I - Variability in RPM reading within treatments (block 1).....	65

Figure 4.4. Experiment I - Herbage mass frequency and cumulative distribution of treatments averaged over all blocks.....	66
Figure 4.5. Experiment I - Cumulative distribution of herbage mass frequency between treatments.....	67
Figure 4.6. Experiment I - Change in NHA rate over experimental period.....	68
Figure 4.7. Experiment I - Trend in leaf elongation rate.....	73
Figure 4.8. Experiment I - Trend in leaf appearance rate.....	74
Figure 4.9 Experiment I - Change in sward composition: Treatment 1.....	76
Figure 4.10. Experiment I - Change in sward composition: Treatment 2.....	77
Figure 4.11. Experiment I - Change in sward composition: Treatment 3.....	77
Figure 4.11. Experiment I - Change in sward composition: Treatment 4.....	78
Figure 4.13. Experiment I - Change in sward composition: Treatment 5.....	78
Figure 5.1. Experiment II - Calibration equation of rising plate meter.....	82
Figure 5.2. Experiment II - Change in herbage mass over time.....	86
Figure 5.3. Experiment II - Variability in RPM reading within treatments (block 1).....	87
Figure 5.4. Experiment II - Herbage mass frequency and cumulative distribution of treatments averaged over all blocks.....	88
Figure 5.5. Experiment II - Cumulative distribution of herbage mass frequency between treatments.....	89
Figure 5.6. Experiment II - change in NHA rate over experimental period for grazing treatments.....	90
Figure 5.7. Experiment II - Change in NHA rate over experimental period for nitrogen treatments.....	91
Figure 5.8. Experiment II - Trend in leaf appearance rates.....	95
Figure 5.9. Experiment II - Change in sward composition: Treatment 1.....	96
Figure 5.10. Experiment II - Change in sward composition: Treatment 2.....	97
Figure 5.11. Experiment II - Change in sward composition: Treatment 3.....	97
Figure 5.12. Experiment II - Change in sward composition: Treatment 4.....	98
Figure 5.13. Experiment II – Change in ME, digestibility, ADF, NDF and protein over the experimental period for all treatments.....	101
Figure 6.1. Experiment I - The relationship between herbage mass and net herbage accumulation.....	104
Figure 6.2. Experiment II - The relationship between herbage mass and net herbage accumulation.....	104



Figure 6.3. Experiment I - The relationship between NHA and pasture utilisation.....	110
Figure 6.4. Experiment II - The relationship between NHA and pasture utilisation.....	110
Figure 6.5. Experiment I - Trend of individual component scores for the first principal component.....	114
Figure 6.6. Experiment II - Trend of individual component scores for the first principal component.....	116
Figure 6.7. Corresponding changes in the weight of the crop ( $w$ ), the instantaneous growth rate ( $dw/dt$ ) and the average growth rate ( $w - w_0 / t$ ). See text for explanation of the effects of harvesting at times $a$ , $b$ and $c$ (Parsons & Penning 1988b).....	119
Figure 6.8. The effect of residual sward state on (a) the maximum average growth rate that may be achieved, and (b) the defoliation interval required to achieve this as predicted by a model that seeks optimal solutions for all combinations of the residual sward state (severity) and the timing of harvest (frequency) in a series of defoliation's in all cases. The solid lines show the optimal solutions. Arrows show the direction of increasing stock density. (Schwinning & Parsons 1999).....	121
Figure 6.9. Unit mass per unit eight estimates ( $\bullet$ ), fitted Fourier curve ( $\text{—}$ ) and associated 95% confidence intervals ( $\text{---}$ ) for three years pooled data (Bishop-Hurley 1999)...	124
Figure 6.10. Contribution of tillers ( $t$ DM/ha) of different seasonal origin to pre-grazing herbage mass in summer, autumn, winter and spring (L'Huillier 1987c).....	137

## List of Plates

Plate 3.1. Sampling of herbage for calibration of rising plate meter.....	57
Plate 3.2. Setup of tiller appearance measurements using a transect.....	57
Plate 4.1. Experiment I - Treatment 1 (870 kg DM/a).....	60
Plate 4.2. Experiment I - Treatment 2 (1140 kg DM/a).....	61
Plate 4.3. Experiment I - Treatment 3 (1394 kg DM/a).....	61
Plate 4.4. Experiment I - Treatment 4 (1635 kg DM/a).....	62
Plate 4.5. Experiment I - Treatment 5 (1917 kg DM/a).....	62
Plate 5.1. Experiment II - Treatment 1 (1098 kg DM/ha).....	84
Plate 5.2. Experiment II - Treatment 2 (1424 kg DM/ha).....	84
Plate 5.3. Experiment II - Treatment 3 (1704 kg DM/ha).....	85
Plate 5.4. Experiment II - Treatment 4 (1913 kg DM/ha).....	85

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In recent times there has been a tangent in the way of thinking by some dairy farmers and advisers. In the early 1960's it was recognised that dairy production on most farms was limited by pasture utilisation, rather than the amount of pasture grown (McMeekan 1961). Subsequently over the next 10 years stocking rate increased from 2.1 to 2.5 cow/ha between 1981 and 1991 (LIC 1997). This higher stocking rate resulted in a higher proportion of the feed grown being harvested (especially over spring), but lead to cows being underfed (Matthews 1995). However the higher stocking rate in general required that the herd calve later to ensure adequate feed (unless large amount of supplements were used), and also resulted in short lactation lengths due to cows having to be dried off progressively over the summer as pasture growth declined. Thomson & Holmes (1995) stated that the average lactation length of 230 days was 75 short of the potential 305 days. Macdonald & Penno (1998) stated that stocking rate is often cited as the cause for poor per cow production. However the reason that farmers do not achieve a long lactation and high per cow production is due entirely to the lack of pasture quality and quantity relative to stock numbers (Penno et al 1996).

Recent trends see farmers adopting systems that operate at a reduced stocking rate, with the aim to improve per hectare production through achieving higher per cow production targets. This means an increase in the strategic use of supplementary feeding to overcome shortfalls in pasture supply, and grazing management which allows high intake of high quality pasture (Cassells & Matthews 1995; Brander & Matthews 1997).

The overall emphasis of these farming systems is on improving cow intake levels and increasing pasture production through maintaining higher post grazing residuals (and hence higher pasture cover levels) throughout the year. It is proposed that these higher levels of pasture cover will allow improved net herbage production through gaining the optimum balance between leaf senescence and leaf

growth (Matthew et al 1995). The common objectives of these farmers were stated by Waugh (1998), and are:

- To maintain emphasis on the efficient utilisation of pasture.
- To overcome the limitations in the underlying pasture supply.
- To develop strategies for the strategic use of supplements to improve farm production and profitability.

Research on the relationship between herbage mass and pasture growth has produced variable results, reflecting both negative (Clark et al 1994) and positive (Brougham 1957; Bluett et al 1998) relationships as well as no relationship. Thus, not surprisingly, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusion of the relationship between herbage mass and pasture growth. Yet the key to these reduced stocking rate farming systems targeting higher per cow production, is that the higher grazing residuals resulting from high pasture allowance to achieve high cow intakes will increase pasture production that will outweigh the reduction in pasture utilisation. Some farmers are budgeting on pasture growth rates increases up to 25% over the winter period through operating at lower stocking rates and higher pasture cover (Matthews pers comm). It is important that farmers have a sound knowledge of the changes occurring to their farm systems through changes in management so that efficient low cost farming can continue.

The experiments presented in this thesis were designed to provide further information on the relationship between herbage mass and pasture growth. With a number of farmers adopting a farming system aimed toward reduced stocking rate and improved per cow production, and with a positive relationship between mass and growth being a key variable in terms of the success of these systems, this research is pertinent to the continued success of efficient dairy production.

This study has been designed to test the hypothesis that higher post-grazing levels (and hence higher pasture cover levels) will result in a positive effect on pasture

growth rates over winter and early spring. The objectives of this study are therefore:

- To study the effect of herbage mass present after grazing on subsequent net pasture accumulation rate.
- To take detailed sward measurements to explain the effect of post-grazing herbage mass on pasture accumulation rate.
- To discuss the implications of these results to the management of dairy grazing systems.