

Messages:

- ▶ **'Minding yourself' during spring is priority No 1.**
- ▶ **Plan and manage the next 2 months.**
- ▶ **Apply the 7 steps to improve farm sustainability.**
- ▶ **Use 23 units of Protected Urea per acre now.**
- ▶ **Calving mismanagement in 2020 has 2021 consequences.**
- ▶ **February cow feeding and care will pay off.**
- ▶ **Correctly deal with premature births or abortions**

MINDING YOURSELF

- ▶ I put this up first as I think it is the most important responsibility dairy farmers have for February because:
 - ▶ You are the most important 'cog' in the wheel; it is so obvious that you "must look after yourself".
 - ▶ All the stats show that farmers work exceptionally long hours during February to April period.
 - ▶ The key principles for 'minding' yourself must be:
 - ▶ Good health,
 - ▶ Adequate sleep,
 - ▶ Good food, and
 - ▶ Being aware you have to manage other people and the overall business.
- ▶ Go to your doctor and have a good check over. If it does anything it will reassure you that everything is ok. Act on advice given.
- ▶ All the top managers in industry plan to get 7-8 hours' sleep each night.
 - ▶ With this in mind, put a structure to your day with a defined finish time, say 7pm. You may have to go back to check cows before bed but "cat-nap" rest will help.
 - ▶ If you are not getting 7-8 hours' sleep, you are heading for serious health problems.
 - ▶ Bad decisions will be made and accidents/injury will happen.
- ▶ Good food is essential for energy.
- ▶ Set your farm up with some 'slack' in spring – if you are set up to be flat out it will be difficult to keep on top of things if something goes wrong then you're stretched – get help in whatever form possible over the spring to ensure the business is performing the way you want it.
- ▶ You need to take time off also – you're the driver of the business, the manager, and so need head space to make key management decisions as well as keeping on top of the physical workload.
 - ▶ Track your hours worked and know when you are being overstretched; put a plan in place to avoid this happening.
 - ▶ Be self-aware and know when you are getting tired, stressed, feeling short tempered – if this is the case reduce your workload
 - ▶ Don't lose all touch with normality – try and structure in off farm/ hobby events but minimise alcohol intake.

Keeping physically fit is key.

- ▶ Finally, surround yourself with and meet people who are positive about themselves and the future.

MANAGING THE NEXT 2 MONTHS

How you plan and manage this critical, stressful time will manifest itself in your 2020 profits and more importantly your health. The following suggestions should be considered

Milking parlour

- ▶ Parlour protocols stapled to the wall allow others to work the parlour without making mistakes.
- ▶ Auto drafting, one of the best investments one can make, allows colostrum/sick cows/mastitic/slow milkers kept with main herd, then drafter out and milked separately at the end.
- ▶ Cheap backing gate can reduce the number of people in and around milking.
- ▶ Have all detergents etc forward bought and diluted and ready to "go" on 1st Feb.
- ▶ Anyone who hasn't the milking machine serviced and ready to "go" now is asking for trouble.

OAD milking

- ▶ Many farmers now do OAD milking for the first 3 weeks, not for longer, of the calving season to free-up time for other tasks.
- ▶ NZ research indicates that quality of the diet is even more important when on OAD as you can get a compounding negative effect if switching to OAD and offering poor quality feed.
- ▶ Must be seriously considered if very short of "help" this spring.

Managing calving

- ▶ This task should be done on a rota of available labour (written down) on the farm so that someone has the responsibility for a set time span during the day/night. All calving protocols should be written down and understood by all.
- ▶ Some large dairy herds are now using a night time watchman to supervise calving and he does the following tasks:
 - ▶ Works from 10.00pm to 6/7am, overseeing calving's, feeding and tagging new born calves.
 - ▶ Scrapes and limes cubicles and feed out/ push in silage
 - ▶ It is relatively cheap for large herds but 2-3 discussion group farmers could share such a watchman so that he rotates between the farms each night.
 - ▶ Clear communication between night and day people is essential – specific pen for calves who have got colostrum etc.

- ▶ Camera on your phone is great technology to minimise supervision time.
- ▶ To minimise risk to the animal give her time to calve; leave cows and heifers 3 and 2 hours respectively before moving in to help.
- ▶ Use 10-15 mls of Iodine disinfectant per naval.
- ▶ Red heat lamp (have it ready) – reduces the need to wait for calves to be licked clean.
- ▶ Colostrum (have the protocols on the wall) within 2 hours is an absolute must and whoever is supervising calving must be given adequate time to be able to do this task correctly because it prevents future problems. Probably best to have a stomach tube policy.
- ▶ Night time feeding can reduce night time calving but you must lock cows away from feed during day and you need to do it for 2- 3 weeks before calving and have at least 1.5 ft. per cow feeding space.
- ▶ Once you have things set up well, trust people, even students, to do their jobs well - don't waste time going around checking (also it drives people mad and they develop a "he doesn't trust me" syndrome – it will be obvious to you if he not up to task).
- ▶ Get surplus calves off the farm as soon as possible as they add to the workload and risk of disease spread.
 - ▶ If it's a dealer don't let him walk through heifers, therefore have a separate house for males. Have disinfectant foot bath at each calf house entrance.
 - ▶ Some farmers let the student sell the calves – price is agreed anyway so he just does the talking with the dealer.
- ▶ Calves should get fresh meal every day to encourage intake.
- ▶ Use pumps to pump milk from parlour to calf houses. Mark quantity levels on tanks so easy measure out required quantities for calves.
- ▶ Three to six individual pens for sick calves have merit but group penning is an essential labour-saving requirement. If short of calf housing, home-made outdoor hutches purchased at €300 each have merit.
 - ▶ For every 100-cow herd with a 6-week calving rate of 80-85 per cent and keeping males for 2 weeks

you will require 50 calf space or 85sq metres of calf housing.

- ▶ Towards the end of February let out early born calves to grass; providing shelter and "a dry lie"... this works.

Contract rearing

- ▶ This should be seriously considered by dairy farmers who; are short of labour on an annual basis or haven't enough work for a full-time person, who are stocked to a max on milking platform and more importantly if they are bad rearer of replacements – admit it if you are! I have a list of Rearers or your Teagasc Adviser can help with contact.
- ▶ The going rate is €1.00 to 1.40.
- ▶ If this venture is to be a success it must be constructed as a "win-win" situation for both parties.

Use contractors more

- ▶ Use contractors to feed silage 2-3 times per week to stock. They will even scrape yards as well.
- ▶ From 15 January on, get him to blanket spread all your farm with nitrogen and/or P & K.
- ▶ Spread slurry with the umbilical system as there will be no damage to roadways, no contamination of grass and no soil compaction of fields – a major issue!
- ▶ Dehorning calves can also be done on contract.

Using the spring grass planner to make life more effective

- ▶ Everyone should use the spring grass rotation planner to manage their daily allocation of grass from 1st Feb to 1st April – if not you shouldn't be reading these suggestions!
- ▶ It simplifies the whole grazing plan. Any of your staff, even the most inexperienced, can manage the grass allocation for your cows
- ▶ Because now you know what your daily allocation of grass will be for every day to 1st April, it is possible to put up the stakes now before you get very busy. The only limitation is the number of stakes/reels you have.
 - ▶ I suggest you set up 10 -12 days of allocation,
 - ▶ All the remainder should be mapped out on the



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farm map with specific yardage indicated so that student can quickly and accurately do it on his own later in Feb.

- ▶ When doing this, take into account paddock entrances/exits, roadway availability, paddock shapes/sizes, water troughs, wet areas of paddocks etc. All that information can be 'minded' for next year.
- ▶ From this you can see it is a major management task, requiring all staff's full mental attention in operationalising the plan; but worth it. But it is a lot more useful time use than sitting on a tractor spreading slurry, fertiliser or feeding cattle.

Steps to improving sustainability

As we are into an era where we all have to do 'something' to improve our environment, dairy farmer with a small amount of thought and action can make a big impact. In my notes for the remainder of 2020 I will be highlighting the 7 benefits listed below. Teagasc have listed a range of farm practices that dairy farmers can easily implement on their farms that can combine profitability gains while contributing to meeting the environmental challenges we face.

- ▶ These practical measures are:
 - ▶ Improving EBI and extending the grazing season (more days grazing) as fast as possible.
 - ▶ Replacing chemical fertiliser with clover,
 - ▶ Using protected Urea as the Nitrogen source,
 - ▶ Reduce losses from farm slurry,
 - ▶ Improve energy efficiency and renewable energy,
 - ▶ Incorporate forestry and hedgerows on the farm,
 - ▶ Using specialist Advisers to help improve water quality.

PROTECTED UREA - SPREAD NOW!

- ▶ Nitrogen is the cheapest feed input you will buy and used early will help you extend the grazing season.
- ▶ Use at least half bag (23 units) of protected urea on every acre of the farm on the same day, as soon as possible to apply. Even on fields with heavy covers, as it saves labour and confusion, while maximising the yield of grass per unit spread.
- ▶ Contrary to popular belief all paddocks, even ones with 1,500 Kgs DM grass cover, should get N, except paddocks that got 2,500-3,000 gallons slurry per acre. Approximately one-third of the farm, any field with a cover of less than 700kg/ha, should get slurry as the Nitrogen source and the remaining area get 23 units per acre of protected Urea.
- ▶ On farms that got Urea in mid-January, the next application, at least 40 units of urea/acre, falls due in mid to late February (4 weeks after the first application).
- ▶ Use the weather forecast to avoid heavy rain within 24-48 hours.
- ▶ There should be no argument on which Nitrogen to use - protected Urea. It saves €17 per ha over other N sources and has 71 per cent lower emissions than other sources.
- ▶ The advice above is for farms which have adequate P or K. However, the following advice should be followed

where P and K are required. Apply, now, 2.5 bags 10:10:20 per acre as an annual maintenance dressing to farms with a Soil Index 3. More is required later for lower Index farms. This is critical advice.

CALVING PROBLEMS IN 2020 HAVE CONSEQUENCE

- ▶ February mismanagement of cows and heifers will adversely affect the 2021 six-week calving rate:
 - ▶ A case of milk fever increases days from calving to conception by 13 days
 - ▶ An ovarian cyst increases it by over 70 days,
 - ▶ A sick cow's conception is delayed by 80 days,
 - ▶ A lame cow's conception is delayed by at least 14 days
 - ▶ A herd losing more than 0.5 BCS has its conception rate reduced by 20%.
 - ▶ A herd with a BCS of less than 2.75 at calving will have 16% lower pregnancy rates
 - ▶ A difficult/hard calving will delay the onset of heat; while womb infection will have the same effect. Hence the need to manage calving carefully; don't rush the cow and particularly heifers and if you have to handle do so hygienically.
- ▶ Vaccinations: Another time critical exercise, actually it should be done in January to reduce Feb workload, but it must be done in Feb so as not to be too near the breeding season:
 - ▶ BVD, IBR and Lepto are the ones to do for.
 - ▶ If late scour or pneumonia or coccidiosis have been a problem take veterinary advice.
- ▶ Make sure parasites, fluke are not a problem.
- ▶ Talk, even if a bit late, to your vet in order to prevent these occurrences.
- ▶ It will pay to let small yearling (animals 200kgs) heifers out to grass now, feeding them 2 kgs meal.
- ▶ The target weights on 1st Feb are 260-280kgs for bulling heifers, depending on breed.

FEEDING/CARING FOR COWS

- ▶ Make sure all dry cows are getting 2-3 oz per head of a good dry cow mineral.
- ▶ Make sure cows and heifers, within 2-3 weeks of calving, are kept on very clean cubicles - their immune system is very low and there now more infectious bugs around.
- ▶ Lame or cows tender on the feet should be looked after now. Get the FRS to do this job because you are too busy and don't know the job well enough.
- ▶ Feed a little meal (0.5 to 1 Kg) for 2 weeks before calving:
 - ▶ Allows you move on to full meal feed within days of calving.
 - ▶ Slowly (14 days) build up concentrates after calving because the cows intake is low and a lot of meal relative to roughage will result in acidosis and other problems.
 - ▶ Fat cows (condition score 3.5+) and not calving for 4-6 weeks should be put on restricted diet otherwise, they will have calving and health problems, as well as milking poorly after calving.
- ▶ Post calving feed 2-3 kgs meal (16%P) with grass and minimum silage.

- ▶ If weather is wet increase by 1-2 kgs for a few days.
- ▶ Feed adequate magnesium, either in meal, in the water or dust the pastures.
- ▶ You must only allow cows graze for 3 hrs per day and or night if out full time, unless weather is exceptionally dry.
 - ▶ James Humphreys, Moorepark, on the Solohead wet farm grazes cows full time 2-4 days per week to graze the weekly spring planner allowance. This minimises any poaching damage resulting from 3 hours “on-off” grazing and is more flexible of rainy days.

DEALING WITH PREMATURE BIRTHS AND ABORTIONS

- ▶ AHI says “we are now in the peak abortion season for spring calving herds so extra vigilance is required”
- ▶ If a cow aborts or gives birth prematurely it should always be assumed to have an infectious cause and be managed, as per AHI, as follows
 - ▶ Identify the aborted cow – if visually obvious get the vet to handle the group of cows to identify the one that has aborted and sample her.
 - ▶ Wear protective clothing when handling aborted material.
 - ▶ Talk to your vet about the legal requirements for notification and testing following an abortion.
 - ▶ Remove the aborted material by placing it in a strong plastic bag and tie it with a cable tie and place it in a 2nd strong plastic bag. Tie again and bring it to the Regional Lab for testing or dispose of appropriately.
 - ▶ Wash and disinfect the area where the abortion occurred.
 - ▶ Immediately isolate the aborting cow for at least 3 weeks until vaginal discharges have ceased.
 - ▶ Remember that all dead foetuses must be tissue tag tested for BVD.
 - ▶ Decide with your Vet

whether to cull or retain the cow

- ▶ Closely monitor other pregnant cows. Inspect pregnant cows at least once per day and isolate any cows showing signs of imminent abortion.
- ▶ Ensure that no animals, especially dogs and foxes, have no access to cleanings.
- ▶ To prevent the spread of Johne’s Disease
 - ▶ Feed milk replacer to replacement heifer calves,
 - ▶ Ensure no test positive or inconclusive cows calve in the same area as negative cows,
 - ▶ Operate ‘snatch calving’ by removing the calf from the dam ASAP after calving to minimise contact with adult dung.
 - ▶ Frequently clean calving area, being generous with straw,
 - ▶ Don’t keep replacements from positive cows,
 - ▶ Ensure cows for calving have clean udders and flanks as they enter the calving pen.

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BITS AND PIECES

- ▶ Only feed best quality silage if feeding silage to milking cows.
- ▶ Early Profit Monitor trends for 2019:
 - ▶ Milk price seems to be down 2-4c/l,
 - ▶ No surprise that meal feeding levels decreased from 2018, but not near enough as bad habits die slowly.
 - ▶ Common cost targets are 13c/l, but most farmers are miles off this target.
 - ▶ Consequently, profits per litre are slightly down.
 - ▶ Submission rates were generally good for the breeding season but non-return rates (NRR) were disappointing. Why?
- ▶ If difficult to sell male calves, consider contract rearing them and selling as weanlings or yearlings. Sooner or later cattle farmers are going to have to buy stock!
- ▶ One liners of interest from recent Grassland Conference:
 - ▶ Barry Murphy, FDC, in his talk “Protecting the Bottom-Line” said:
 - ▶ Believe in Yourself,
 - ▶ Invest in yourself,
 - ▶ Your management style mirrors your personality. If you are pessimistic it is easy see how you will manage your farm and particularly people.
 - ▶ On farm owners who want Share-milking: “Farmer wants that son/daughter with him that he never had”. The point being that many owners going into share milking are going to treat the share milker as a child, while he’ holds the reins”
- ▶ Farm owners’ attitude post farming career: They have unfair expectations, Not clear for next gen 3rd party collaboration dilemma, Dealing with debt.
- ▶ Every solution is different for different farmers’ dilemma:
 - ▶ ‘No one size fits all’
 - ▶ Take a distilled approach,
 - ▶ Align yourself with a relevant peer
 - ▶ Aim for your own individual goals,
 - ▶ Defining what you need from your farm dictates what you do.
- ▶ Patrick Gowing Teagasc, on “Saying Yes or No to dairy opportunities”
 - ▶ Efficiency on your own farm is essential prior to expansion,
 - ▶ A high return on investment will have a negative cash flow in the initial start-up years – could be up to 6 years.
 - ▶ Increasing cost structure post expansion (system drift) will make expansion unviable

“You learn from experience but mistakes teach you wisdom” (Sitting Bull)



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