

## Messages:

- ▶ Plan and manage the spring workload
- ▶ Take care of yourself
- ▶ Spread 24 units Protected Urea on two-thirds of the farm in early February
- ▶ Use LESS spread slurry to replace N on 2/3 area to 1st April
- ▶ February cow feeding and care will result in a good breeding season
- ▶ Good calf and heifer care a prerequisite for 6-week calving targets

By Matt Ryan

### SPRING WORK-LOAD; HELPFUL HINTS

- ▶ Dairy farmers will nearly do half their yearly work-load during February to April.
  - ▶ How they plan and manage this critical, stressful time will manifest itself in this year's profits and more importantly their health.
  - ▶ Most farmers have expanded in cow numbers but building requirements, labour availability and organisation have not kept pace with numbers.
- ▶ "Get your ideas out of your head and onto a Whiteboard" – IGA Conference (Tom O'Connell) – has a few benefits when done at the Monday weekly meeting:
  - ▶ Helps on-farm communication,
  - ▶ Staff are helping you plan and 'buying-in' to planning.
  - ▶ Identifies tasks that 'need to be done' and 'would be nice to get done', (the latter, which if not done can be done tomorrow or next week)
  - ▶ Staff volunteer for tasks – work shared out by agreement with no duplication or confusion.
- ▶ So, with availability of "help" tight, we have to think and act smarter - even at this late stage of calving to get through the spring.
  - ▶ Some or all of the following suggestions should be acted on:

### 1. Milking parlour

- ▶ Auto drafting, one of the best investments one can make, allows colostrum/sick cows/mastitis/slow milkers etc be kept with main herd, then drafter out and milked separately at the end.
- ▶ Cheap backing gate can reduce the number of people required in and around milking.
- ▶ Have all detergents etc forward purchase, 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.
- ▶ Younger staff, with good training, should be able to do the milking, freeing yourself up for more demanding tasks, supervision and management.
- ▶ A good milking rota helps, particularly, if milkers are spending a long-time milking.
- ▶ The following is the cow milking protocol practiced by some farmers:
  - » Fresh cows milked first, colostrum-rich milk stored separately,
  - » Identification straps (colour based on day of week) are applied to fresh calver,
  - » Main cow mob, whose milk is eligible for bulk tank, having removed straps on appropriate day.
- ▶ All staff must know and understand why it is necessary to be gently and careful around cows at calving and in the milking parlour.

### 2. OAD milking

- ▶ Many farmers now do once-a-day (OAD) milking for the first 3-4 weeks, not for longer, of the calving season to free-up time for other tasks.
  - » Until 60-70% calved.
  - » It has no adverse effects on cow's milk solids yield.
- ▶ NZ research indicates that the 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.
- ▶ You should seriously consider, if very short of "help" this spring.



### 3. 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 or night. All calving protocols (SOP's) should be written down and understood by all.
  - » Calving pens should be labelled, A, B, C, etc.
  - » There should be a diary in the shed to record cow number, calf's gender, and his number plus pen born in.
  - » Group cows for calving periods based on scans. And move to calving pen last task in evening.
  - » Have the place set-up so that one person can draft on his own.
- ▶ 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, feeding and tagging new born calves.
  - » Scrapes and limes cubicles and feed out/ push in silage.
  - » It is relatively cheap, €70-100 per night, 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; specifically the calves who have got colostrum etc.
- ▶ Camera app on phone to see calving cow is great technology to minimise supervision time but be careful not to rush in too soon to "help".
- ▶ To avoid damaging the cow, give her time to calve; leave cows and heifers 3 and 2 hours respectively before moving in to "help".
- ▶ Infra-Red heat lamp (have it ready) – reduces the need to wait for calves to be licked clean.
- ▶ Colostrum (have the SOP's 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 sick calves add enormously to sprig workload. Some farmers, to be



## Successful Calf Rearing Getting the basics right

Heave Regan,  
Head of Ruminant Nutrition, Agritech

Dairy heifer calves, as the milking herd of the future, are a priority group of animals. Over the next number of weeks, by adopting best practice management on farm, optimal performance can be achieved, ultimately leading to having a heifer that calves down at 24 months at 90% of her mature body weight.

The management of these heifer calves in the first weeks and months of life will have a significant impact on both lifetime production and long-term profitability of the dairy herd. The cost of rearing a heifer to calve at 24 months is approximately €1,500, with heifer rearing representing up to 20% of a dairy farm's expenses. Therefore, the typical 100 cow herd with a 20% replacement rate is about to start a long-term investment process of approx. €30,000 over the next few weeks.

To reach such targets, replacement heifers must achieve a steady gain of approximately 0.75 kg/day from birth. Interruptions to performance over the calf rearing period may offset target weights being achieved. In the short-term, the aim should be to double the calf's birthweight by weaning at 8 weeks of age.

In order to do so, it is essential the following key calf rearing practises are managed well on farm over the next vital few weeks:

1. Provide the calf with sufficient levels of high quality, clean colostrum within the first few hours of life.
2. Introduce starter concentrates from at least three days of age to kick start rumen development.
3. Offer clean water ad lib to calves. Milk should be considered a feed, not a drink.
4. Offer a clean long-fibre forage (ideally straw), above ground level, to increase rumen function and entice greater dry matter intake.
5. Provide calves with a high quality, high dairy content milk replacer consistently (accurately weighed and mixed, using sterile utensils).
6. Facilities must be clean, well ventilated, draught free and well bedded. A calf spends approximately 80% of its time lying down – provide a deep, warm, dry bed.
7. Weaning calves on a weight basis will result in having a more uniform group – only wean once calves are consistently consuming 1.5 kg of concentrates per day.



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certain calves get the required quantity in the first 2 hours, stomach tube all new born calves.

- ▶ Night time feeding of silage can reduce night time calving but you must lock cows away from feed during the day and you need to do it for 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.
  - » Don't let anyone walk through heifer calf house - only access is to the rearer, therefore, have a separate house for males.
  - » Have disinfectant foot baths 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 the parlour to calf houses. Mark the quantity levels on tanks so as to make measuring out the required quantity easier 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 or purchased at €300 each have merit.

#### 4. Contract rearing

- ▶ This should be seriously considered by dairy farmers who, are short of "help" or haven't enough work for a full-time person, are stocked to a max on milking platform and more importantly if they are bad rearer of replacements - admit it if you are!
- ▶ The going rate is €1.00 to 1.40, maybe with bonuses added on.
- ▶ If this venture is to be a success it must be constructed as a "win-win" situation for both parties.
- ▶ If you are having difficulty selling male calves consider contract rearing them at the same price as females. In some cases they are sold as weanlings off the rearers farm. Tom Coll, Teagasc, Sligo has many clients rearing males on contract.

#### 5. Use your contractor:

- ▶ Use contractors to feed silage 2-3 times per week to stock. They will even scrape cubicles and yards as well.
- ▶ From 15 January on, get him to blanket spread all your farm with nitrogen, P and 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 should also be done on contract.

#### 6. Use the spring grass planner:

- ▶ Everyone should use the spring grass rotation planner to manage their daily allocation of grass from 1st Feb to 15th April - if not using, you shouldn't be reading these suggestions!
- ▶ Using it, a child could grass-manage your cows in Feb-March.
  - ▶ The principles are:
    - » 30% of milking platform (MP) must be grazed in February. These paddocks will be:
      - Drier, closer to the yard, have multiple access points, sheltered, new grasses, quickest growers and have covers of 800 - 1200 kgs DM.
      - Some silage ground should be grazed in this period if you wish to graze again (recommended) before closing in mid-April.
    - » 30% from 1st March to 17th March with covers of 1200+
    - » And, last 40% by 5th April.
    - » Heavy farm targets and late growth areas should be 7-10 days later than these dates.
  - ▶ It is a little more labour demanding but it will

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guarantee that you grow/use at least 0.5 tons more grass per hectare up to 1st April – increases farm profit by €90/ha.

- ▶ 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.
  - » I suggest you set up 10 -12 days of allocation, having blanket spread fertiliser first.
  - » All the remaining area should be mapped out on the farm map with specific yardage indicated so that any staff member can quickly and accurately do it on his own later in February.
  - » 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 so that you don’t have to go through the same procedure next year.

- » From this you can see it is a major management task, requiring all staff’s full mental attention to operationalising the plan; but worth it! But you are making better use of your time than sitting on a tractor spreading slurry, fertiliser or feeding cattle.
- ▶ A Batch Latch is a great idea to automatically open the paddock gate to allow cows leave the paddock when grass is eaten and

walk at their ‘own pace’ to the parlour.

## LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

- ▶ As you are the most important ‘cog’ in the wheel, it is so obvious that you “must look after yourself”.
- ▶ Have a structure to your day with a defined finish time, say 7pm. You may have to go back out to check cows before bed but still get off farm for those three hours – you need a defined start and end to the day. If it is longer than 14 – 17 hours you are heading for serious health problems.
- ▶ You also need to take time out – you are 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 e.g.
  - » ‘I won’t do night time checks as I need a good night’s sleep’.
  - » ‘I will get more help’.
  - » Be self-aware and know when you are getting tired/stressed or 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 – hard this year with Covid.
  - » Minimise alcohol and keeping physically fit is key.
- ▶ Eat correctly – this year is a challenge. It might be worth buying a dinner daily (quality pre-packed dinners from Country Crest are excellent) if you don’t have time to cook proper meals.
- ▶ Set your farm up with some labour ‘slack’ in spring – if your set up to be flat out to keep on top of things and something goes wrong then you’re stretched and probably losing money – get help in whatever form possible over the spring to ensure the business is performing the way you want it.

- ▶ Cow and calf deaths, letters from the Bank manager and Department of Agriculture, generally have a fierce upsetting effect on farmers. I don't have the answers as to how you overcome such challenges when you are tired. But what I do know is that excessive worry does not sort things out. Rationally address the issue and get help.
- ▶ I like Tom O'Connell's principles for spring, given at the IGA Conference – "The 'Switched on for Spring' Guide":  
S – Simple systems,  
P – Purchase in time,  
R – Rest,  
I – Inventory – do a 'stock-taking' of your needs  
N – Necessary work, only,  
G – Good communication.
- ▶ Finally, surround yourself with and meet people who are positive about themselves and the future. Continue to participate with your Discussion Group through Zoom sessions. Farmers tell me that these are "great for them" to see and chat to fellow farmers.

### NITROGEN, P & K - A MUST DO EARLY

- ▶ All this talk about too much nitrogen and losses doesn't mean you must stop using it but you must use it differently and more efficiently.
- ▶ Nitrogen is the cheapest feed input you will buy.
- ▶ Use at least half bag of protected urea (24 units/acre) on the farm on the same day.
  - ▶ You must put it on immediately if you have not done so – as early as you can on wet farms.
  - ▶ Even on fields with heavy covers.
  - ▶ Saves labour and confusion.
  - ▶ Maximise yield of grass per unit spread.
- ▶ One third of the farm should NOW get its Nitrogen from 2500-3000 gallons of slurry per acre – covers with less than 700kgs DM, using the LESS systems.
  - ▶ When one-third of the farm has been grazed spread 2500-3000 gallons of slurry on that area.
- ▶ Contrary to popular belief all paddocks, even ones with 1,500 Kgs DM grass cover, should get N, except paddocks that got slurry.
- ▶ On farms that applied Urea in mid-January, the next application of at least 40 units Urea/acre falls due in mid to late February (4 weeks after the first application).
- ▶ Use the weather forecast:

- ▶ So that no heavy rain comes within 24-48 hours of spreading the fertiliser,
  - ▶ Rain within 24 hours will ensure slurry works better.
- ▶ There should be no argument on which Nitrogen to use as Urea as it is cheaper than CAN, and is equally as good but care must be taken where soil pH is high. Farmers in Derogation have to use protected Urea.
- ▶ The advice above is for farms who have already applied P or K, having done so in Sept. However, the following advice should be followed where P and K are required: Apply 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.

### FEB STEPS TO IMPROVING 6 WEEK CALVING

February mismanagement of cow and heifer will seriously adversely affect next year's six-week calving rate:

- ▶ A case of milk fever increases days from calving to conception by 13 days: Caused by insufficient calcium (too much in the diet before calving).
- ▶ An ovarian cyst increases it by over 70 days. Caused by; metabolic diseases, negative energy balance, high production, retained placenta, dystocia, stress and genetics. If a problem, talk to your Vet early.
- ▶ A sick cow's conception is delayed by 80 days,
- ▶ A lame cow's conception is delayed by at least 14 days. Knowing this means you must cure the lameness fast,
- ▶ A herd losing more than 0.5 BCS has its conception rate reduced by 20%.
- ▶ A cow with a BCS of less than 2.75 will have 16% lower pregnancy rate: At calving, identify cows in this category and 'look after them',
- ▶ 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 cows, 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 get caught near the breeding season:
  - ▶ BVD, IBR and Lepto are the ones to do for.
  - ▶ If late scour or pneumonia or coccidiosis have been a



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problem take veterinary advice.

- ▶ Make sure parasites and 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 now) heifers out to grass now, feeding them 2 kgs meal so as to achieve target bulling weights.
- ▶ The target weights on 1st Feb are 260 - 300kgs for bulling heifers, depending on breed or 50% of the cows' mature weight.

## 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 is now more infectious bugs around.
- ▶ Lameness 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 cow's intake is low and a lot of meal relative to roughage will result in acidosis and other

problems.

- ▶ Fat cows (condition score 3.7+) 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 2-4 kgs meal (16%P) with grass and minimum silage.
  - ▶ If weather is wet increase by 1-3 kgs for a few days.
  - ▶ From most of the grass budgets I have done it seems as if farmers should only feed 1- 3 kgs meal during February so as to graze more than 30% of the milking platform by 1st March.
  - ▶ In March the meal feeding level will be 3 – 4 kgs as more cows are calved.
- ▶ 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.

## CARING FOR THE YOUNG HEIFER CALF

- ▶ This is a “must do well calf rearing period” – badly reared under-perform for life.
- ▶ Biestings (colostrum) early is the most important way to prevent calf rearing problems associated with scours and pneumonia. Follow the 1,2,3 rule:


Use colostrum from the first milking for the first calf feed  
Give colostrum within 2 hours of the calf's birth,  
Give at least 3 litres.

- ▶ Give another 2 litres within the next 6 hours.
  - ▶ A stomach tube (done correctly) alleviates some of the feeding problems. Most farmers now use it as a time saver and guarantees consumption of 2-3 litres in that first feed.
- ▶ Disinfect the naval with tincture of iodine (15-20 mls) after birth.
  - ▶ Mother may lick this off, so do it again before calf enters calf pen.
- ▶ Avoid virus pneumonia by having plenty of ventilation (0.8 sq. ft. per calf both inlet and outlet), no draughts, a dry bed, hay and fresh meal ever day.
- ▶ Make plans to have calves at grass in March or at least have some access to it.
- ▶ 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.
  - ▶ Join the AHI scheme to eradicate it – contact your Vet.

**“Progress isn't made by early risers. It's made by lazy men trying to find easier ways of doing things”**

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