

Messages:

- ▶ “Being a better farm manager in 2021”, How?
- ▶ Develop SOP’s for all tasks on your farm.
- ▶ Plan to utilise more grass.
- ▶ Your plan to maximise spring grass.
- ▶ Get ready for the February workload.
- ▶ Consult your calving and early calf rearing requirements to ensure everything in place.
- ▶ Your Discussion Group is your most valuable asset – drive it on!

By Matt Ryan

BEING A BETTER MANAGER IN 2021

- ▶ Most farmers are working so hard they haven’t time to ‘really manage’ the farm. They are working on ‘loose routines’ to get things done and making plans as the fly from one job to the next. This is very stressful and almost certainly is one of the reasons that farms under-perform.
- ▶ To manage a farm, you must have a PLAN, which as a starting point must evolve from good current RECORDS (establish where you are) and then plan forward.
- ▶ Farmers, who are serious about staying in business and maximising profit, should use the following management recording tools (which are you not doing?):
 - ▶ Dairy Profit Monitor
 - ▶ Cost Control Planner
 - ▶ ICBF Milk Recording
 - ▶ ICBF Herd Health Recording
 - ▶ Grass Measure every week and record on line with www.PastureBase through Teagasc
 - ▶ Breeding Chart, plus breeding plan
 - ▶ Condition Score Chart
 - ▶ Mastitis (Clinical) chart
 - ▶ Lameness Chart
 - ▶ Fertiliser Programme/Nutrient Management Plan
 - ▶ Farm Safety Statement

If you don’t put these in place in early January you won’t use them during the year. Arising from these, the overall farm can be developed; a financial plan, a grassland plan, a breeding plan etc.

- ▶ The financial plan, the Cost Control Plan, should be done now based on last years accounts. If you can’t do seek help from your Adviser,
- ▶ The grassland plan must be done now so that you farm adequate hectares to provide enough grass to maximise yield and at the same time have adequate silage for all your stock next winter – your Adviser will have this planner.
- ▶ I would also do the Breeding Plan now, because you will be too busy in February and March. When to start mating (MSD), when to start heat recordings, when to start Metrichick, who and when to start synchronization, etc.

Using these tools, I would be very confident that: common costs can be kept between 13- 17 cents per litre; that 11 -14 tons/ha of grass can be utilised; that a 90 per cent 6-week calving rate can be achieved by farmers who are willing and

have good management capabilities. The driver of profit from here on will be costs, because milk price will fluctuate greatly from one year to the next.

- ▶ You might say you haven’t the time to do all this recording; well, you should make time because this “work” will, according to the experts, deliver you €60-200 per hour extra profit. The larger the outfit the greater the profit. How can you make this happen? We will discuss later.
- ▶ For sure, using these tools will leave far more profit this year than driving a tractor around the farm spreading slurry, fertiliser, topping, doing all milkings, etc.
- ▶ Farmers who have a good Adviser should have these individual reports analysed and reported on. Then you, the farmer, should act on the recommendations.

DEFINE YOUR SMaC

Your SMaC defines your Specific, Methodical and Consistent set of durable, operating farm management practices that create a replica and consistent success formula.

- ▶ It is clear and concrete, enabling the entire enterprise to unify and organise its efforts, giving clear guidance regarding what to do and what not to do.
- ▶ Your SMaC recipe reflects research proven practices about what actually works.

The following SMaC, as I see it, might be taken on board by most dairy farmers – modify to suit yourself:

- ▶ Remain loyal to KISS principle; keep it simple stupid! That is, a grass-based, low-cost system of spring calving dairying with no cattle (on the farm) or replacements on the milking platform (MP),
- ▶ Be driven by our two key performance indicators (KPI’s); Utilise 12+ ton grass DM/ha over whole farm and achieve a 90 per cent, 6-week calving rate.
- ▶ Maintain a high EBI cow, with a PD for fertility and milk of €120 and €60 respectively, a PD for % F&P of 0.31 and 0.20 respectively, and positive on health traits with a Maintenance target of €20-25.
- ▶ Producing quality milk, with no penalties, is our No.1 product, no beef, no cull cows, no surplus in-calf heifers, and no stock bulls on the farm.
- ▶ Operate at a stocking rate no more than 3cows/ha on MP and 2.6 overall – subject to new environmental requirements.
- ▶ Measure, assess, plan, act and review every year.
- ▶ Measure the financial performance yearly (Profit monitor), quarterly (Cost Control Plan); the grass growth weekly on PastureBase; the genetic performance of the herd on ICBF; the yield per cow on milk recording. The Dairy Profit Monitor (DPM) must be completed for every year in December.
- ▶ Manage grass throughout the year using: the spring rotation planner, the overall grassland planner, the grass wedge and the last rotation plan.
- ▶ A “happy staff is a productive staff” is our motto, with the aim to manage 130 – 160 livestock units per labour unit, including family, available. High labour efficiencies are possible by using contractors and the

LEAN principles.

- ▶ Comply with all environmental and staff management statutory requirements.
- ▶ All planning decisions made will be jointly made either with employees and/or family whenever appropriate.

DEVELOP SOPs FOR YOUR FARM

SOPs (Standard Operation Procedures) are now a common sight on most well-run dairy farms. What are they? They are specific written instructions to supplement normal on-farm training as to “how we do things on this farm”.

- ▶ What are their benefits?
 - ▶ They enable all farm “hands” work towards the farm goals
 - ▶ They provide direction for all staff on specific task procedure
 - ▶ Communication is improved – there is less chance of ambiguity of message
 - ▶ Training time is reduced
 - ▶ Tasks are completed to a consistent standard
 - ▶ Emergency staff will know “the way we do things here” at a glance
 - ▶ They create a sense of teamwork on the farm
- ▶ SOPs generally should be:
 - ▶ Written in bullet points with not more than seven per SOP on a single page
 - ▶ They should be clear, readable and understood by all
 - ▶ They must be farm specific, and linked to the farms’ goals
 - ▶ They must be located near the workstation where required
 - ▶ Pictures help the understanding
 - ▶ Laminate them – a laminator is not very expensive
 - ▶ Take feedback on content but more particularly, monitor how they are implementing them – if poorly check out why
 - ▶ Review and update regularly
- ▶ Continue to train staff on how to perform tasks on the farm and train them to follow the SOP as outlined.
- ▶ The following are examples of calf rearing SOPs:
 - ▶ Calf shed procedure
 - ▶ New born calf
 - ▶ Calves on feeder
 - ▶ Sick calf identification and treatment
 - ▶ Cleaning calf shed
- ▶ From this you can see that all tasks must be broken down into short specific sections. Students and staff should be encouraged to photograph them and refer to them whenever the need arises.

PLAN TO UTILISE MORE GRASS

We are only growing 60-70 per cent of the grass quantity we could and must grow on our farms due to:

- ▶ Poor soil fertility – we should never again allow this to enter the debate on farm walks, as it is too obvious
- ▶ Poor grass varieties
- ▶ Poor grassland and grazing management practices

An absolute necessity now is to get a soil test done

on whole farm as next year is too late. Act on the recommendations. There is no point in complaining about big tax bills if your soil is deficient in the major nutrients.

- ▶ Nitrogen: From mid-January you must apply 23 units/acre (Protected Urea more cost effective) on farms where cows go out to grass mid-February. Get this chore out of the way in January. Apply on the entire farm – a major mistake that many farmers make by applying it in “dribs and drabs”.
- ▶ Lime: There is no fertiliser more important than this and it gives best value for money. I don’t know what words to use to get you to apply LIME – but you are wasting your time farming without having soil Ph 6.3+.
- ▶ Phosphorous and Potash: As a result of all the environmental talk, many farmers don’t know how much P & K. to use:
 - ▶ As a basic requirement apply 2 bags 0:10:20 on grazing fields 3-4 bags 0:7:30 on silage fields (reduced with slurry use).
 - ▶ For Index 1 and 2 you need more.
- ▶ Slurry spreading: To get more efficient use of slurry, you must use the LESS system - Low Emissions Slurry Spreading, that is trailing shoe or band spreader. This will increase Nitrogen recovery by 15% - a saving of €10-15 per hectare.
 - ▶ Spread from 12th January to 31st January depending on your slurry storage zone.
 - ▶ Use the umbilical system – it is brilliant as you minimise roadway damage, soil compaction and you free up labour.
- ▶ When planning to spread fertiliser or slurry, use the weather forecast to be sure you have 2-3 dry days after spreading. Don’t spread within 1.5 yards of a river, stream or well.

MAXIMISING SPRING GRASS

- ▶ Because spring grass is so valuable, 4 times cheaper than meals, we must take all steps to maximise the quantity grown up to mid-April.
- The cows’ intake is increased, % F & P increases while costs decrease, resulting in increased profit of €2,50/cow/day, even by being out 2-3 hrs per day.
- ▶ The plan:
 - ▶ Do a spring rotation plan on PastureBase so that you know the area to graze each day, and achieve the following targets:

Targets	Light/Early Farms	Heavy/Very Late Farms
30% Grazed	1st March	15 March
65% Grazed	17th March	1 April
Start 2nd Round	Early April	15 April

- ▶ It is really important to graze as much as possible in February so as to:
 - » Promote growth and remove dead material,
 - » Have enough regrowth at the start of the 2nd round –

paddocks need 55-60 days for this to happen.

- » The chances are you will only be feeding 2-3 kgs meal/cow in February but may have to increase to 4kgs in March.
- ▶ The following suggestions may help to achieve the targets:
 - » As cows calve graze them on 700-1000kg covers,
 - » Feed them grass and meal with NO silage as it easier to get good graze outs. Their intake during the first few weeks will only be 10 – 12 kgs DM/cow/day.
 - » Put a plan in place to do on-off grazing in wet conditions. If you have to keep cows in fully for a few days, you must then graze extra ground each day (lower meals levels) to catch up with the targets on the spring rotation plan.
 - » If you plan to make silage on the milking platform, you must graze 7-8 grazing paddocks in early February before moving to the area that will be set aside for silage.
 - » After the 23 units of N has been applied, preferably dry ground and perennial ryegrass swards, measure out the daily allocated area as per the Spring Plan and put up the stakes/wire for 10-12 days (one job out of the way for early Feb).
- ▶ Walk the farm at least once around late January to establish the average farm cover (AFC) and make the following decisions:
 - ▶ Identify the paddocks where you will start grazing; ones that:
 - » Have 700 – 1000 kg DM/ha covers,
 - » Have good infra-structure, that is, a good shape with spur roads,
 - » Are dry, and,
 - » Ideally, near the milking parlour.
 - ▶ Identify low cover paddocks that should get slurry, approx one-third of the area, and heavier cover paddocks that should get 23 units/ha of protected Urea.
 - ▶ Make a note, in a notebook, paddocks for dry and wet weather grazing, based on ground conditions.
 - ▶ Do a grass budget, based on AFC on 1st February, and spring calving pattern so that you know:
 - » How much grass, meal and silage to feed per cow per day.
 - » When you can let out cows by night,
 - » That you have 650 kgs AFC on the first week of April and able to reduce meal feeding to 2kgs/cow/day from mid-April.
- ▶ Write up this PLAN on wall chart so that all staff/family know what is supposed to happen.

CHECKLIST FOR CALVING AND CALVES

- ▶ Now is the time to “line up all your ducks in a row” for calving as follows:
 - ▶ Calving intervention guide booklet available

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- ▶ Develop SOP's for identifying cows due to calve, calving etc
- ▶ Calving jack with ropes in good working order
- ▶ Bottle of lubrication plus examination gloves
- ▶ Iodine disinfectant – you need to apply 10-15 ml to each naval
- ▶ Stomach tube is an essential requirement to ensure new born gets his colostrum requirement within a few hours of birth. Check that the bag is not leaking or that the tube isn't worn or damaged
- ▶ ICBF calving book with biro and pencil
- ▶ Calf tags and tagger
- ▶ Bottle of calcium and magnesium plus flutter valve
- ▶ Hydrated lime – required to disinfect calving pen after calvings
- ▶ Have you an adequate number of calving pens?
- ▶ Have you a restraining gate in 1-2 calving pens?
- ▶ Is the camera in good working order?
- ▶ Have you a working/overseer order worked out for you staff, family and yourself? A night-time calver, for large herd or where 2-3 farmers combine, has real merit, costing €70-100 per night.
- ▶ SOPs: have you these laminated and nailed to the calving pen wall?
- ▶ The following is your checklist for a successful early calf rearing season:
 - ▶ Develop SOPs for calf rearing and management
 - ▶ Have you adequate area available for all calves?
 - ▶ Are the pens hygienically clean and disinfected?
 - ▶ Hot water provided
 - ▶ Soap, gloves, and handwashing facilities
 - ▶ Calf feeders with teats, buckets and scrubbing brush
 - ▶ Medical requirements at hand, such as, electrolytes, provision to treat scour, pneumonia etc
 - ▶ Disinfectant facilities ready for inside and outside calf shed
 - ▶ Bedding material
 - ▶ Do you have adequate area available for all calves? See Table 1.

Table 1: Effect of calving rate and age at sale on peak calf numbers for 100 cows

6-Week Calving Rate	Age at sale of beef calves	Peak calf numbers	Space required sq. meters
70%	2 weeks	47	80
70%	4-5 weeks	58	100
85%	2 weeks	50	85
85%	4-5 weeks	69	118

- ▶ Get your Adviser or discussion group to check over the calf house ventilation.

GET READY FOR...

- ▶Calving by feeding minerals and meals if cows are thin. But make absolutely certain that cows or incalf heifers aren't getting too fat – restrict their intake.
 - ▶ Feed 2-4 oz per head per day of dry cow minerals to cows and heifers for 42 days before calving.
 - ▶ As cows must calve in body condition of 3.25 – 3.5, thin cows must get meal and fat cows must be on restricted silage, particularly late calvers.
 - ▶ As dry cow mastitis treatment is now wearing off it is essential that cows and particularly heifers are kept on clean beds to avoid early lactation mastitis.
 - ▶ List out your cows' expected calving date on your diary.
 - ▶ Have the calving equipment and houses ready.
- ▶ Milking by servicing the milking machine.
 - ▶ This can be a DIY job with some easy maintained machine, but you must know what you are at.
 - ▶ You should shop around for liners and rubberwear.
 - ▶ You must test the machine if your SCC is high and not tested for a few years.
- ▶ Mastitis by keeping the animals' environment very clean and minimise feeding and bullying stress.
 - ▶ Move the 'expectant' cows into the calving area 7-10 days before and practice night time silage feeding.
 - ▶ If mastitis in heifers has been a problem, more than 10 per cent of them calved down with it, last year, teat seal them 4-6 weeks before calving.
- ▶ Possible Health Issues: At least 2-3 times per week walk through all animals watching out for:



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- ▶ Animals not feeding when others are
- ▶ Lameness or “tender” animals (remove from group and treat).
- ▶ Empty animals (is she/he sick?)
- ▶ Injury (remove from group immediately)
- ▶ Bullying (take out the bully as they prevent resting and regular feeding)
- ▶ Lice, coughing, scratching etc. (dose and/or treat)
- ▶ Sore eyes
- ▶ Dribbling etc (check for IBR and pneumonia)
- ▶ Abortions (check if salmonella is the cause)
- ▶ Sign up for the Irish Johnes’s Control Programme so as to eliminate the problem.
 - ▶ While it is voluntary it is subsidised by DAFM and the industry
 - ▶ Register with AHI on www.animalhealthireland.ie
- ▶ Long working hours by resting well and booking relief help for a few days per week.
 - ▶ Work hours are going to be 12-16 hours per day but get help before accidents happen due to tiredness and running from one job to the next.
 - ▶ Being tired will result in you being “cross, irritable, impatient, not able to think straight’ and not respectful of family/employees/other farm visitors”. Be honest; have you been like that? If in doubt ask your partner or another family member.
 - ▶ At this late stage it will be very difficult to get manpower; so, what can you do:
 - » Get your contractor do some or all of the following tasks; spread slurry, spread all fertiliser, feed silage to all stock, dehorn calves, your contract calf rearer may be in a position to take your calves earlier, etc.
 - » There are a lot of University students studying from home this year and would be only too glad of an income from milking – so put the word around.
 - » Transition year student are another good resource.
- ▶ To kill ragwort now by spraying in early January with MCPA or 24D

DISCUSSION GROUP: YOUR MOST VALUABLE ASSET

- ▶ Never before was your discussion group more important to you.
 - ▶ The challenges facing dairy farmer are great; viz, Brexit, environmental constraints, volatile milk price and costs, Covid, labour shortage and isolation.
 - ▶ That is where ‘group moral support’ is so important.
- ▶ Don’t tell me your Group is no good and that you get nothing out of the meetings. You have to work to make it good.
- ▶ You should have had your AGM by now and be ready to roll before cows start calving.
 - ▶ Have an annual programme made out so that the Group easily functions for the year.
 - ▶ Any officer should not serve more than one year; because it is such a good training ground for shy or people who need to develop their communication and leadership skills.
 - ▶ A small sub-committee should decide on the annual programme and other tasks.
- ▶ Discussion Groups must move on to dealing with the “new era” requirements of dairy farming, listed above.
 - ▶ Business management
 - ▶ Labour management and training staff
 - ▶ Team decision making
 - ▶ Strategic planning
 - ▶ Managing personal health and stress
 - ▶ Whole farm analysis of farms visited is very beneficial

I would like to wish a Happy New Year to the families of all my readers.

