

Teagasc Notes for week ending Friday 14th January 2022

Getting ready for the busy spring

Late January and early February, is the beginning of a very busy period on dairy farms with the start of calving? Compact calving to grass means the work gets very intense, very quickly. There is still time there to get organised before the chaos begins.

Before calving begins, go through the cows in the shed and condition score them. Where housing allows, separate the cows into groups based on body condition score. Those that are thin (low BCS 2.5); those that are on target (BCS 3-3.5) and those cows that are overweight (BCS >3.5). The target for cows is to be at a BCS of 2.75 at breeding so you have to allow for the fact that they will lose up to half a condition score after calving. Therefore, your target for calving is 3.25. Thin cows will need to be prioritised for the best quality silage available and they will also need 2 Kg of a good pre-calver nut per day to help them gain condition. As the time is short, it will not be possible to make up all the ground needed, so consider putting this group on once a day milking after calving. Research has shown that this is a very effective way of getting cows to gain condition and hold them within your calving pattern. The heavy cows that are over BCS 3.5 will need restricted feeding to halt weight gain as they will be prone to metabolic disorders after calving.

To prepare for the calving season, make sure you have all the necessary equipment you need on the farm and stored correctly near the calving pens. Check your calving jack and ropes to make sure they are in good condition. Make sure you have enough calving gloves; lubrication gel; calcium bottles; flutter valve; disinfectant; naval disinfectant; electrolytes. It is always handy to have some synthetic colostrum in case you need it in a hurry. If you have not already done so, check you calving pens and calf sheds. Make sure all the gates are hanging, closing properly and any repairs are carried out before the calving starts. Check the calving camera is working and any yard lights and internal shed lights are in good working order. Finally, look at your own work wear. Wellingtons, wet gear etc. is at the ready. A head torch is very useful to increase light if you are checking cows at night. Finally think health and safety and make sure the area is tidy and free from trip hazards. Waste bins and bin liners for calving used gloves etc, to keep the calving area tidy is also a good idea.

In terms of grassland, growth has been very good over the mild winter and grass covers have increased on farms. High fertiliser prices mean that slurry must be viewed and used as a very valuable source of nutrients to grow grass. Apart from the cost element, taking this approach will help from an environmental perspective also. Use slurry first and chemical fertiliser second to achieve 60 unit of nitrogen by the 1st of April.

A soil thermometer is a worthwhile investment of €20 to €40. Soil temperature needs to be above 7-8 degrees for microbial activity and nutrient uptake by grass. Therefore, applying slurry or chemical nitrogen (even after the 12th of January) at less than this temperature is a waste of money and bad for the environment. Using Low Emissions Spreading equipment also retains more nitrogen from slurry. Urea is more stable at this time of year and should be used in place of CAN in the early period. This helps to reduce Carbon emissions from our farms. Keep an eye on the weather conditions at all times. If you have not sampled, now is the time to do it before any slurry or fertiliser is spread on the land to get the most accurate measurement of where your soil pH and nutrient levels are.