

Teagasc Notes for week ending Friday 30th October 2020

Getting Ready for the Autumn

It has been an abnormal year for the most part following all the restrictions we have faced and are facing with Covid-19. However as we know, farming is one constant in our lives that may have become difficult this year but has largely remained the same. On beef farms, the cattle are now facing an inevitable lockdown of their own – housing for the winter.

As grass growth slows down and as the land gets wetter, its time to start looking at the winter housing period. Before livestock are housed full-time, we still have time to review a few things to help as part of our preparation.

Gates, Doors and Feed Barriers:

A quick check should be carried out on all gates, doors and feed barriers in sheds. In some cases these will not have been looked at since the cattle were turned out last spring and niggling problems from last winter may have been forgotten about. Check that gates and doors are all hanging, swinging and latching correctly. Lower gates hangers get eroded over the years due to dung build-up and may need to be replaced. Give a look at the timber toe-boards below the feed barrier. These wear and rot over time or the wedges holding them in place may fall out as wear occurs. Replacing these now will ensure that minimal silage gets pulled into the slats or gets wasted. Any repair or welding work should be carried out immediately as they will be in immediate use once the cattle arrive.

Water Troughs:

Fix any leaks that are present now. Again the water in many sheds may have been switched off since the cattle were turned out and these issues may have been forgotten about. As well as a source of water wastage, the cumulative effect of a leaking trough will take up a proportion of space in the slatted tank, reducing the overall capacity. Check the bands/holders around the water troughs for signs of fatigue and repair them where necessary. Make sure the ballcocks in the troughs are working and shutting off the water at the correct level, that the plugs/stoppers aren't weeping and make sure the water troughs are level to minimise water loss.

Ventilation:

A simple ventilation test can be carried out within the shed to make sure there is adequate airflow. Poor ventilation in a shed will give rise to respiratory issues such as coughing and pneumonia in younger cattle. Non-toxic smoke pellets can be used to detect the air pathways in the shed and to ensure the ventilation system is working efficiently. Where there is inadequate airflow i.e. the smoke is not travelling out the ridge cap at the top, it may be time to assess the side sheeting of the shed to allow more air in or to raise the ridge to improve outlet ventilation.

Slats:

It is under no circumstances safe to enter the slurry tank of a slatted shed to check the condition of the slats. However, using a mirror on a telescopic stick and a flashlight, it is possible to check the underside of the slats from above ground. Where any steel is exposed i.e. the concrete on the underside of the slats has eroded, it is time to order replacement slats. This erosion occurs over time,

especially in tanks where the slurry tank fills against the underside of the slat over a long period time. Replacing slats is an expensive undertaking and it may be late in the year to be looking at this now, but it is important to know the condition of the slats as it will be a very costly exercise if one was to collapse.

Silage Testing:

It is important to acknowledge that your silage will form the staple diet for your cattle for up to 5 months so it is essential to know its' exact feed quality. A silage test will give you the dry matter percentage, protein percentage and the energy value of the silage amongst other valuable information which are tools to help you formulate your winter diets. Where the results are poor it will enable you to supplement the silage at an appropriate rate to ensure the cattle are thriving. The outlay for a silage sample now is very small in comparison to the consequence of a low live-weight gain over the winter which may only be realised next spring.

