Teagasc Advisory Notes

Teagasc Notes for the week ending Friday December 23rd 2017

Suckler Cows

Late Pregnancy Management of Sucklers is Critical

Spring calving suckler cows are now in mid or late pregnancy. With 75% to 80% of a calf's potential birthweight being laid down in the last two months before calving, then pre-calving management and preparing for calving is crucial in reducing problems at calving time. Consider the following:

Pen space - As pregnancy progresses, the calf foetus expands and grows so too does the space required needed for suckler cows. If your pens are overstocked, cow performance will suffer, due to restricted movement in pens which reduces free access to forage. If feeding concentrates, make sure all cows can eat at the feed barrier together.

Body Condition Score (BCS) - Spring calving cows need to be at BCS 2.5 at calving. Cows should be divided and fed according to their BCS status when housed. It is important to group similar cows together when housing as cows at different levels of condition require different levels of feeding. Fat cows (BCS4) may experience calving difficulties while thin cows (BCS2 or less) may suffer depressed milk yield and may be delayed returning to heat for the next breeding season. Restrict feed to fat cows, while thin cows may need concentrates in order to meet their BCS target at calving time. Grouping cows on body condition will allow feeding levels to be targeted to nutritional demand. The ideal situation is where cows can be split into three groups - fat cows can have fodder restricted depending on quality, cows in ideal body condition can be fed ad lib silage and thin cows will require supplementation with concentrates. It is important to act early - research at Grange has shown you cannot reduce calving difficulty by starving cows. Equally over feeding concentrates in the last few weeks approaching calving in the hope of getting cows into the required body condition does not work. The cow will put this extra feeding into the calf leading to a bigger calf at calving and more difficulties. This means if you have thin cows feed concentrate in conjunction with silage from the day you house cows. You can monitor their condition and if they are getting too fleshy, pull back on the concentrate levels. Cows need to be monitored throughout the winter so that cows are "fit and not fat" before calving.

Spring Calvers in good condition - Feed 1kg extra below for thin cows

72% DMD Feed restricted access silage (80% of requirements)
65% DMD Feed silage ad lib
60% DMD, Feed silage ad lib + 0.5kg to 1.0 kg concentrates
55% DMD, Feed silage ad lib + 1.0 kg concentrates

Parasites - Liver Fluke and lice are the most troublesome parasite of suckler cows. Well fed, healthy cows have strong immunity to worms. All housed cows should have been treated for fluke at this stage. If treating cows at the present time, consult your vet on the most effective product to use. Any veterinary product used should control early immature, immature, and adult fluke. When treating for Lice, ensure to cover all the stock in the shed.

Mineral/Trace Element Supplementation - Silage is generally well balanced in major minerals but is deficient in trace elements such as Copper, Selenium and Iodine. Pre-calving mineral licks (in buckets) can be offered to cows 6 weeks prior to calving. Alternatively, a dry cow mineral mix can be sprinkled on the silage at a rate of 100grams per head/day for 6 weeks before calving. If feeding thin cows concentrate check mineral content as compound rations will be balanced for minerals.

Vaccination for Scours - Vaccines can be used in combination with good nutrition and hygiene to combat infections. Vaccines against E.coli, Rotavirus, Coronavirus and Salmonella will give passive immunity to calves via colostrum from the cow immediately post calving. These vaccines generally have to be given one to three months prior to calving to be effective so make sure you check with your Vet with regard to timing of vaccination. Check veterinary produce label for dosing rates, injection site etc.

Sheep

Grassland management

During December, it is important to stay focused on your closing plan for winter, in order to ensure sufficient grass supplies for next spring. For March lambing flocks, the target is to have 60% of grazing ground closed by late November and 80% closed by early to mid-December. These targets are based on a 120-day rest period and an early March lambing flock, so they may have to be adjusted for earlier lambing or higher-stocked farms. There may be a temptation to go back into closed paddocks and regraze them to extend the grazing season and delay housing but this will come at a cost as it will reduce spring grass supplies.

Work at Athenry has shown that each week closing is delayed by grazing in December, can reduce grass availability next April by up to 150kg DM/ha. Remember, for a mid-season flock, a ewe currently requires 1- 1.5kg DM of grass per day, and that same ewe will require between 2.5 and 3kg by mid-March/April. For those who are out-wintering stock, ideally this should be done on a confined grazing area. Extended grazing of ewes or lambs, with daily or twice-weekly allocations, has been shown to be effective at maintaining performance. It is important to assess covers to determine available supplies. Ewes and replacement lambs will need allocations of between 1 and 1.5kg DM/day. This can be reduced but supplementation may be needed to meet the shortfall.

Housing

Where possible, ewes need to be housed dry. It can take a week for a wet fleece to dry out in the shed. Where this is not possible, try to house in batches and ensure adequate ventilation in the shed. It is important to footbath all sheep before housing. Most importantly, avoid housing lame sheep; the closer confines are an ideal environment to spread potential infection. Ensure lame sheep are cured before introducing them to the main batch.

Happy Christmas

All of the staff in Waterford Kilkenny wish all our clients and readers a very happy Christmas and a successful and safe farming year in 2018.

NDP
NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN