

Teagasc Notes for the week ending Friday 14th July 2017

Dairying

Keeping grass right

It is important to keep a strong focus on maintaining grass quality through the summer months. This is the time of year when grass gets out of control on many farms and production suffers. However, you must aim to have the right grass ahead of the cows. By doing this, herd performance will stay high. For those who measure grass this is 1,400kg DM/ha of leafy grass.

Almost every farm has a pigtail stake. If you can't see the crossbar on the pigtail stake when you place this in the grass cows are grazing (ignore the dung pats), then grass is too stemmy to be grazed. Cows perform poorly when on this stemmy grass. They also find it harder to graze, and therefore, their grass intake drops.

Milk protein production suffers the most when grass quality is poor. Often milk protein content falls by 0.1-0.2% during mid-season months. This will result in a lower milk cheque. Feeding more meal will not fix milk protein when cows are grazing poor quality grass. So put this stemmy/poor quality grass into bales. It will be valuable feed for the winter period.

Peak growth rates and optimum stocking rates

Very high grass growth rates over recent weeks have prompted some queries as to whether grazing stocking rates could be increased to make better use of peak grass growth. While closing extra area for main crop silage to match growth and demand is a good option in the short term, the consequences of carrying extra cows to increase stocking rate needs to be considered over the longer term. There are a number of factors that complicate defining the optimum stocking rate for an individual farm. The most important of these is probably annual grass production per hectare, because it defines the feed available per cow within the system. Total forage intake (grass plus silage) for a standard 550kg cow yielding 440kg milk solids is approximately 4.7t DM/annum, or 5.5t DM equivalent grass growth (to account for losses). Farms with low annual growth (9.0 tonnes DM/ha) will support stocking rates less than 1.7LU/ha, while high growth rate farms (14.0+ tonnes DM) are capable of carrying approximately 2.6LU/ha.

Pushing annual stocking rates beyond the growth capacity of a farm can be very expensive. For example, it is estimated that for a herd making little or no silage surplus, the purchased feed bill will almost double by increasing cow numbers by 20%. If base milk is less than 30 cent per litre, it leaves very little margin for the extra milk after additional overhead costs per cow are paid. The focus should be on growing more feed per hectare and stocking the farm to balance annual grass growth, not just for the high growth months. Remember, 'surplus' bales are only surplus if you don't need them yourself for next winter.

Make savings on purchased feed this month

The next four-to-six weeks is an important time to target savings on concentrate feed. Cows have passed peak milk production, body condition is stable and beginning to rise, and the majority of the herd are hopefully back in calf. With good grazing management, herd average milk yields of 23 to 25 litres can be supported on grass only. There may be some cows (late calvers etc.) yielding well above this level but it does not make economic sense to feed supplement to all cows to cater for this small percentage of the herd.

Examine your herd average milk yield at this point - could this be achieved on a grass only diet? The key grass management techniques (weekly grass covers, removing surpluses as bales etc.) should be in place to ensure high quality grass. Remember, if you see a noticeable lift in milk yield and protein when cows move to silage after-grass, then grass quality on your paddocks is lacking. A typical 100-cow herd could save €2,500- €3,000 this month by pushing for high quality grass and removing the 1-2kg concentrate per day fed as a habit in the parlour.

Mature cow weight- what can it tell you?

The weight of mature cows in your herd is a very useful figure to know but we often end up working with estimates rather than actual data. Mid-late July is a good time to take some measurements – weighing a representative sample of 25-30% cows in third lactation or higher is sufficient. Some useful rules of thumb:

- heifers should be 30%, 60%, and 90% of mature weight at six months, bulling, and calving;
- the herd should be producing 80-82% of mature bodyweight as milk solids; and,
- dry cows require 2% of bodyweight as a daily feed allowance.

You can also calculate efficiency measures like grass utilised and comparative stocking rate more accurately. So, for example if your mature cows weigh 580kg then heifers should be 175kg, 345kg and 520kg at six months, bulling and calving respectively; your herd should be producing 460kg milk solids on a high grass diet; and your cows require 11.5kg DM during the dry period.

Don't ignore a summer SCC rise

Despite an annual improvement in the monthly SCC of milk recording herds over the last few years, we still consistently see herd SCCs starting to rise from early summer. It then usually continues to creep up for the rest of the year. It is likely that the same pattern is happening with your bulk tank SCC. Is your bulk tank SCC starting to creep up slightly? If so, don't ignore it. It may be because the number of infected quarters in your herd is starting to increase a little, which in turn can lead to more infected quarters, and so on. High herd SCC in late lactation is generally because of spread of infection during the summer, not 'just late lactation'. Don't assume that small bulk tank SCC increases during the summer will 'settle down' - act now, and set your herd up for late lactation, with minimal mastitis infections and maximum milk production. Identify problem cows by milk recording the whole herd now, and identify any high SCC cows, i.e., where SCC is >200,000cells/ml.

1. High SCC cows should be marked and milked last to minimise disease spread.
2. Discuss a treatment plan with your vet: while treatment may appear to be the most logical option, remember that cure rates can range from 20-80% depending on various factors, such as the bacteria involved, the duration of infection and the cow's lactation number.
3. Remove the source of infection – dry off individual quarters, i.e., simply stop milking it: do not use a dry cow tube. Consider culling if the cow is a repeat offender, i.e., has a high SCC in two consecutive lactations.