

Teagasc Notes for the week ending Friday 28th July 2017

Cattle

Grazing young calves

A common sight in July on many farms that have young dairy-bred beef calves, is these calves up to their knees in pasture that more often than not has headed out. This grass has very little leaf cover and is very low in feeding value. Hence the performance per day of these calves is without doubt very poor. Meals are sometimes fed to compensate for this poor performance, which leads to the calves eating even less grass per day, causing the grass to get even further ahead of them and making matters worse. This downward spiral should either be avoided or stopped if it is starting. Ideally, calves should only be grazing swards that are no more than 8-9cm in height and should be moved regularly before the grass moves ahead of them. Small groups of calves should be avoided as they cannot graze swards down quick enough, unless they are in very small paddocks. Older born calves should be off meals from June to September unless the weather is unusually wet. A leader follower system works best for calves as they are constantly getting the best pick of the sward, are moving every couple of days and are never being forced to graze down a sward to the butt. If you do not have a follower group then just use the topper instead. Divide up large fields or paddocks with electric fencing suitable for use with calves, so that they do not spend more than three to four days on the same patch of ground. The Teagasc Green Acres Calf to Beef Programme has found huge differences in the performance of calves at grass during the summer from one farm to the next, with most of this due to management factors.

Liming grassland soils

Some 70% of fields on drystock farms are now below the target soil pH of 6.3. This means that some of the nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) present in these soils, or applied on them in fertiliser and slurry, is significantly less available for the grass to take up. For example, when the soil pH is at the correct level it releases up to 80kg of N per ha per year, worth €80 per ha per year. Research from Teagasc Johnstown Castle is now clearly showing that where soil P levels are low, the first step to improving them is to meet the soil's lime requirements. Even if no extra P was applied to these fields, applying lime will significantly improve their soil P test. In short, the money spent on lime is one of the best investments a drystock farmer can make on his farm. Remember that lime can be applied at any time of the year. Spreading it after a grazing or after a silage cut is ideal. Lime will start working once it is applied and washed into the soil. The finer fractions will adjust the soil pH, while the larger components will work over a 12- to 24-month period in reducing the soil's acidity. Apply the rate of lime that your soil test report recommends but don't exceed 7.5t per ha (3t per acre) in a single application and apply the balance in year three. Where fields are more prone to poaching after liming (due to certain soil structures), spreading the lime at a lower rate per ha but more regularly will get over this problem.

Assessing cows for milk

Numerous suckler cow studies in Teagasc Grange over the years have demonstrated the importance of milk yields when it comes to maximising the weaning weight in calves. The extra weight a suckler calf puts on when it is suckling on the cow stays with it throughout its life. A suckler cow that does not have reasonably good milk yields has no place on a suckler farm and, more importantly, should not be providing any replacement heifers for the herd. If milk yield is one of the more important drivers of weight gain then it must be measured so that:

- poor yielding cows can be culled and replaced;
- high yielding cows can be identified to keep replacements from; and,
- the accuracy of the breeding indexes for your cows and heifers can be increased.

Weighing calves while they are still suckling is the best way to estimate the amount of milk their mothers are providing to them. Ideally, this should be done when they are between 150 and 250 days of age as their weight at this stage is less influenced by the amount of grass they are eating themselves, and the younger they are the less meals (if any) they will be eating. The ICBF provides a

weighing service for all farmers, and they will also record the weights on their database so that they can be used to assess the breeding value of the cows. If you are using your own weighing scales make sure to enter the weights online through HerdPlus. The more weights that are recorded, the more accurate the star ratings of your cows will be.

Health and Safety

Bale-stacking at heights

- Falling from stacks or loads of bales is the biggest cause of bale-handling injuries. This can be prevented by building secure stacks and binding stacks and loads
- Particular care is needed when removing bales from stacks, as many people, when trying to free jammed bales, fall from stacks or edges
- Remove big bales from the top first. Never remove bales from the bottom of the stack, as this may leave overhanging bales unsupported

