

Maintaining freshly-calved cows' BCS

It is vital that you take the time to assess body condition score (BCS) on each calved cow by the middle of the month. This will allow time for any corrective action before the breeding season.

Thin animals should be put onto once-a-day milking straight away. Leave with the main herd and feed as before. This will improve the energy balance of such cows quite quickly. Simply feeding thin cows extra concentrates will likely result in milk-volume response, but will not correct BCS in time for breeding.

During March, cows should be on

a "rising plane of nutrition"; even 5-6kg grass DM/day will help to minimise BCS loss at this time.

Feed a high-energy (0.95+UFL/kg fed) concentrate at the following rates to support 23kg milk production per cow:

- 3kg 14% crude protein (CP) concentrate on grass full-time (13kg DM);
- 4.5kg 16% CP concentrate on grass part-time (7kg DM) and 70% DMD silage (5kg DM); and,
- 6kg 18-20% CP concentrate if housed full-time on silage (11kg DM).

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In all cases, feeding a high UFL/moderate CP concentrate means that milk potential from energy marginally exceeds milk potential from protein. This is likely to be beneficial for retaining BCS. Finally, during early lactation, the risk of

displaced abomasum and other digestive problems is increased with >35% concentrate in the diet. Therefore, allocating high levels of concentrate to correct energy balance can often be counterproductive. Focus on getting high-quality forage into the diet instead.

March grassland management targets

- Target 70 units/acre of nitrogen (N) to be applied by April 1.
 - Target an average farm cover of 500kg DM/ha at the beginning of the second rotation in early April (two-three paddocks should have a cover above 1,000kg DM/ha at this time).
 - Follow your spring rotation plan – 30% grazed by end of February and 65% by mid March; adjust your target end date if percentage grazed in February is reduced.
 - Regrowth levels need to be monitored through March. Ideally, average farm cover should be measured three to four times during the month.
- During difficult weather conditions:
 - use a back fence after each grazing so animals can't return to grazed ground;
 - use on/off grazing to reduce soil damage, while maintaining grass DM intake;
 - avoid highly-vulnerable paddocks (graze these during drier weather);
 - avoid long narrow paddocks/strip layouts/poor grazing infrastructure;
 - avoid paddocks with very high covers of grass – graze paddocks with low covers instead; and,
 - accept an increased grazing residual height if necessary to avoid soil damage.

Late-calving cows

Cows calving from late March onwards are an important group in the herd as they have a much greater risk of being non-cycling at mating start date. They tend to be older, have an excess BCS at calving, are mostly in-calf to longer gestation beef bulls, and have poorer mineral status due to less regular supplementation. In short, this group has the highest risk of failing to achieve pregnancy by day 42 of the breeding season, yet management practices often aggravate the risks for many herds.

It is essential to control BCS gain to a maximum of 3.25 by limiting intake until two weeks pre calving if necessary. Ensure 25g of supplementary magnesium (Mg) is continued until point of calving. Feed a low potassium (K) forage (<2.2%) before calving and use short gestation bulls with calving difficulty of less than 2.0% as a rule. Do not turn out to a grass diet before calving, as this will greatly increase the risk of milk fever.

The 1-2-3 of the CMT

Early identification of mastitis gives you the best chance of cure, and of preventing persistent problems. The California mastitis test (CMT) is a quick and easy “cow-side” test that is useful for detecting subclinical mastitis by estimating the somatic cell count (SCC) of the milk. The test works on the principle that mixing milk with a reagent causes the somatic cells in the milk to rupture. When the DNA is released from these cells, it coagulates and forms slime. The more cells there are in the milk, the more jelly-like the result! It is good practice to check all freshly-calved animals with the CMT before including their milk in the bulk tank for the first time. CMT kits are widely available and are very inexpensive. Replacement bottles of reagent can be purchased separately. This is one of the best investments to make in your dairy.

Three easy steps to the CMT:

1. After discarding the first three-four squirts of foremilk, collect two-three squirts of milk from each quarter in each separate well.
2. Add an equal amount of reagent to each well. Swirl the paddle gently, mixing for 10 seconds.
3. Look at the consistency of the fluid in each well (not the colour), and record the amount of gel reaction that occurs within 20 seconds (from none to almost solidified).

What do the results mean?

- Results are generally categorised as follows: negative; trace; 1; 2; and, 3.
- This test is subjective, e.g., what you score as a 1, your neighbour might score as a 2.
- Remember – the important thing is that any positive reaction (1, 2 or 3) indicates a high SCC in that quarter.
- To become accurate and consistent, practice on cows with known high SCCs.

For more information, see the CellCheck Farm Guidelines for Mastitis Control, or see the YouTube video at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6vDjeG7Ry4&feature=youtu.be>.



Managing peak workload

Peak workload will occur on most dairy farms this month. Focus on the following:

1. Cows: get them out to grass full-time, to reduce yard work. Prevent late-calving cows becoming too fat, leading to possibly additional work with calving.
2. Calves: feed once a day from three-four weeks of age. If sheds are under pressure (overstocked), put a batch of stronger calves to grass and also feed them once a day.
3. Contractors: should you be spending time on slurry and fertiliser applications during a busy March? Could these tasks be completed by a contractor?
4. Time management: prioritise your time to calving cows and getting them to grass. Other tasks cannot be ignored, but can be completed by other people.



RESEARCH UPDATE

Colostrum storage

George Ramsbottom reports on the best ways to store this valuable resource.

Research at Teagasc Moorepark reported that 90% of Irish dairy producers store colostrum. Colostrum has traditionally been stored in a freezer, as this prevents changes in quality and growth of bacteria. However, defrosting colostrum can take more than an hour and if completed incorrectly can render the colostrum useless. A good practice to follow is to submerge the sealed, frozen container in a bath of warm (not hot, body temperature) tap water until it thaws completely, stirring occasionally. Thawing time will vary depending on container size. A good option is to use freezer bags to store it as they take up less room in the freezer and have a greater surface area which means they should defrost faster.

About one in five farmers store colostrum at room temperature, or in a refrigerator, for up to one week. Storing colostrum at room temperature, particularly as the temperature increases in March, does not affect the quality (i.e., the antibody level) of colostrum, but bacterial numbers increase and the pH reduces. Calves fed colostrum with extremely high levels of bacteria absorb fewer antibodies, which can have implications for their health and well-being. You can store fresh colostrum safely for up to two days in a fridge. Store it as soon as possible after collection because bacterial growth is highest in the first three to six hours after collection. And, make sure that the containers used to both collect and store it are thoroughly cleaned before use.



HEALTH & SAFETY

Older farmers face higher risk

During 2016, 13 of the 21 farm fatal accidents happened to farmers aged 60 years or over. Age is an internationally-known risk factor for farm deaths. In northern European countries, systems are in place which allow farmers to retire by the age of 60. In contrast, about 50% of Irish farmers are aged 58 or older. What can

be done to minimise the fatal and serious injury rate among older farmers? Communication within the farm family is key to gaining a realisation of dangers to older farmers. In particular, dangers associated with tractors and machinery, livestock and assessing heights should be considered.