It's not too late to make changes that will reduce your spring workload

There are currently 1.4m dairy cows in Ireland, onethird more than in 2010. But taking into account new entrants and retirements we have virtually the same number of dairy farmers. This is an astonishing increase in productivity which comes at a cost. Many of these farmers will soon be working an unsustainably high number of hours during the busy spring period.

In a survey conducted by Teagasc researcher Marion Beecher, farmers estimated that in spring 2018 they worked 86 hours per week (12.4 hours per day) and took less than one day off during March. Farmers don’t need to be reminded of this but what are they doing about it? The survey asked farmers to list what steps they have taken to reduce their workload in the critical calving period.

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Three-quarters of the farmers were contracting out slurry spreading, almost four in 10 were using contractors to spread fertiliser; just 6% were using contractors to feed their cows. About one in three had adopted once a day milking (for a short period) and a similar number were feeding calves once a day from 14 days old. One in seven had a dedicated night-time calver.

The survey conducted in collaboration with Teagasc advisors received 349 responses which were collected from 37 discussion groups in 12 counties. The average number of dairy cows calved in spring on each farm was 162. The average area of land on the milking platform was 56ha. Although the sample was not nationally representative (herds were larger here than the national average), the results provided valuable insight into spring 2018. Only eight farmers had not implemented any labour-saving practices at all, whereas 341 (98%) had implemented one or more practice. What’s stopping them doing more?

Labour-saving workshop

At a workshop on labour-saving held as part of the Teagasc national dairy conferences, Marion Beecher, Abigail Ryan and Pat Clarke of Teagasc facilitated a discussion around labour-saving initiatives with farmers. According to Pat Clarke, the biggest challenge in outsourcing jobs such as slurry spreading to contractors can be getting your head around the idea of actually doing it. “Don’t underestimate the challenge of changing the way you do things. But during the high-pressure springtime most farmers will be much better off timewise if they get contractors to do jobs such as spreading slurry, spreading fertiliser, and even feeding their cows.

“The contractors will have larger, more capable equipment which means they will do jobs faster and more efficiently. There is a financial cost attached to using a contractor but there can be a very substantial saving in hours worked for the farmer and there is less wear and tear on his equipment. Using a contractor can eliminate the need to buy equipment.”

In a worked example at the conference (and every situation will be slightly different) an example with 200 cows was able to save 200 hours by outsourcing feeding, fertiliser and slurry spreading, according to farmers at the workshop. “This will be money well spent if the farmer can reduce workload at this time of year,” Marion Beecher pointed out the importance of planning and measuring whether you are actually reducing your hours worked. “It’s important to start with your end goal in mind and work back,” she says. “If you target finishing at 4pm and it takes two hours to milk then you will need to start milking at 4pm.

Marion points out that while milking once a day will reduce solids produced, it can save a significant amount of time each day.

“Getting away from single-calf pens to adequately sized group calf sheds, having the calf shed close to milking parlour, and selling calves at 34 days will all reduce workload in the spring,” according to the farmers.

For further details of the survey findings see article entitled, Labour and Stress issues on farms by Marion Beecher and Paidi Kelly in the winter 2018 edition of the Teagasc publication. Research available on the Teagasc website.

Pat and Marion are absolutely right that the greatest challenge is still in your own head, concludes Abigail. “Using contractors for an increasing number of jobs, for example, might feel uncomfortable at first but if done correctly you can trust to do good work, at the right time and for a fair price, and everyone wins.”

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Abigail Ryan described more of the types of initiatives which can help reduce workload: “Every dairy farm is unique and each farmer will need to identify where time savings can be made on their farm but milking always accounts for at least one third of the entire animal workload so that has to be as efficient as possible. Having an adequate number of milking units is essential as is a good drafting system to manage individual animals. Contract rearing of heifer calves is an area more farmers should invest in. For a fair price, and everyone wins.”

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