

# Act now to alleviate the dairy bottleneck

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

There are currently 1.4m dairy cows in Ireland, one-third more than in 2010. But taking into account new entrants and retirees 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 160. The average area of land on the milking platform was 54ha.

Although the sample was not nationally representative (herds were larger herd 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%) farmers 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 time-wise 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



Dr Marion Beecher of Teagasc Moorepark 'brainstorming' labour saving initiatives at the Teagasc National Dairy Conference.

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 6pm 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.

“The point about labour-saving steps is that they are cumulative. They might help you to get your workload down to an acceptable level but they might also make the difference between having to employ a person or not.”

Calf management is another area where simple changes can save time (see the article by Stuart Childs).

“Getting away from single-calf pens to adequately-sized group calf sheds, having the calf shed close to milking parlour, and selling calves at 14 days will all reduce workload in the spring,” according to the farmers.

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 annual 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 investigate if they are finding this a high-pressure zone on the farm along with selling male calves.

“There is always a range of possibilities, you can spend almost anything you like on facilities but your local Teagasc dairy advisor will be able to talk through the options. Some initiatives can still be taken before calving starts, others can be discussed later

in the year. The key point is that investing in facilities will help ease your workload.

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

• 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 *TResearch* available on the Teagasc website.