

Managing the spring workload

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Workshop objective

Identify facilities and technologies to make the calving workload easier to manage.

Background

Spring is one of the most demanding times of year on a dairy farm. Weather challenges combined with the workload associated with compact calving and inadequate facilities can result in increased stress and workload for farmers, their families and employees. There are practical approaches that can be used to help it go smoothly and with less stress.

Accurately reviewing 2018 by answering three questions will help identify actions to be completed that will help set you up for a better calving in 2019; (1) What worked well? (2) What were the challenges? and (3) What could be improved for 2019?

Teagasc dairy advisors completed a survey, consisting of 20 questions, with their dairy discussion groups reviewing spring 2018. In total, 349 responses were collected from 37 discussion groups in 12 counties.

Table 1: Results from 349 farmers reviewing spring 2018

What worked well?	What were the challenges?	What could be improved for 2019?
Enough people for the workload	Weather	Facilities
Other ('bobman', 'kept myself warm', 'went out for breakfast once a week')	Workload and labour	Keep less stock (sell cull cows and male calves earlier)
OAD milking and calf rearing	Feed issues	Hire more people

Summary

The success of spring on your farm will largely be determined in advance. Time spent planning now will pay rewards. Even if it feels like an extra chore now, good planning is smart farming and it will reduce stress and save time during calving. Preparation that can be completed in advance of calving will help reduce the peak workload. A checklist can help organise what needs to be done for you and others working on the farm:

- Prepare the calving area (e.g. prepare a calving kit –jack, ropes, gloves, lubricant, wash, disinfect and bed pens)
- Set up the calf shed (e.g. wash and disinfect, order tags, purchase electrolytes)

- Set up the milking parlour (e.g. arrange to have parlour serviced, change liners and repair any broken items)
- Do a stock take and purchase items (e.g. calcium and magnesium etc. and store safely in the medicine cabinet)
- Have a farm office where a farm map with paddocks numbered is visible.
- Prepare a spring grass plan and have plenty of reels and make any necessary repairs to fences.
- Organise work stations (e.g. set up areas of the farm with the equipment used at that location. It may be necessary to have multiples of certain items such as a shovel/fork/brush/scraper. Keep all calf equipment in one location. Have stock rooms tidy and have a white board with weekly and monthly plan on display.

Labour saving practices

To reduce the workload on farm during spring, farmers should adopt more labour saving practices. The percentage of farmers implementing labour saving practices is presented in Figure 1. Using a contractor to spread slurry was the most commonly used practice (74%) while contract feeding was the least commonly used practice (6%). One third of farmers were using once-a-day milking; previous research has shown that labour efficient farmers milk once-a-day for four weeks in spring. Having a set finishing time in the evening is essential to being labour efficient. The most efficient farmers start evening milking by 4pm and are finished milking by 6pm, while research shows no effect of 16:8 hour compared with a 12:12 hours milking interval.

After milking, calf care is the most time consuming task in spring. This spring, 37% of farmers practiced once-a-day feeding of calves. This along with having adequate facilities (enough shed space for all calves), close to the milking parlour which can be mechanically cleaned out are essential. To further reduce the workload, bull calves should be sold from 14 days.

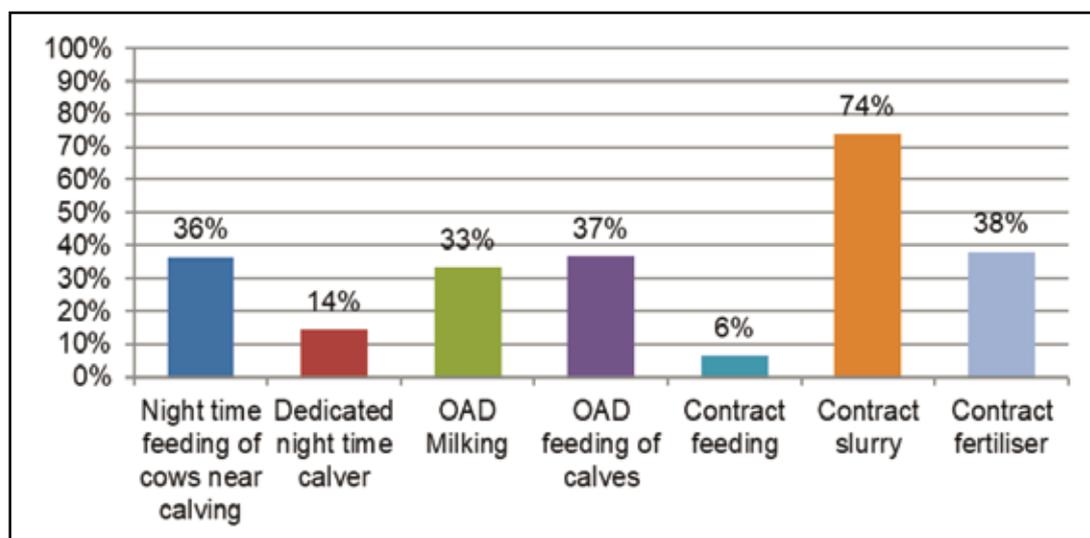


Figure 1: Percentage of farmers implementing labour saving practices in spring 2018

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the dairy advisors who conducted the survey with their discussion groups.