

Be winter ready on Beef Farms

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Persistent rainfall from Mid-October has fast-tracked the housing of cattle in recent weeks. At this stage with the majority of cattle housed we look at some of the areas that farmers should think about in the coming weeks to ensure a successful winter housing period.

Feed quantity

When it comes to winter feed, there are two critical measures; feed quantity and feed quality. The saying your better looking at it than looking for it is particularly relevant. Cast the mind back to the winter of 2012/2013 where wide spread fodder shortages affected many farmers in the country. So now is the time for to access the situation on your own farm to prevent a similar event from occurring next spring. This can be done by completing a simple fodder budget. Completing a fodder budget is a two-part process, it involves working out how much feed you have on you farm and working out how much feed you need. There are a number of fodder budgeting tools available on the Teagasc website to assist in the completion of a fodder budget for your own farm. At this stage I would advise that farmer's error on the side of caution and budget for at least a six month winter as who knows what the elements will throw at us next spring.

Feed quality

When planning diets for cattle this winter, you are effectively in the dark if you do not know your silage quality. Taking a silage sample and sending it for analysis to assess its nutritive value is most definitely a worthwhile task for farmers so they can tailor their diets for the various groups of stock on the farm. Tests costs between €30-40/sample for a forage analysis with some feed suppliers offering free analysis to customers purchasing a significant volume of feed.

Parasite control

Parasites can have a significant impact on animal performance and with housing been the most expensive time for animals it is important stock are free from parasite burdens to prevent any impact on performance. The three main parasites that affect livestock are fluke, worms and external parasites and it important all three are controlled.

Lying/feeding space

Providing the correct environment for stock over the winter months is important to ensuring good performance. Fundamental to this is ensuring adequate lying and feeding space. Tables 1 and 2 look at the ideal lying and feed spaces required for the different groups of stock housed in slatted accommodation over the winter months.

Animal type	Space allowance
Suckler cows	2.5-3.0
Animals greater than 275kg	2.0-2.5
Animal less than 275kg	1.2-1.5

Feedstuff	Suckler cows	Finishing cattle	Light store cattle	Weanlings
Ad-lib roughage	400-500	400-500	250-300	225-300
Restricted roughage	600-700	600-650	500-600	400-500
Concentrates	600-700	600-650	500-600	400-500

It is advisable where possible to group animals in accordance with weight. This will stop heavier animals bullying lighter animals for space at the feed face.

Air flow

Pneumonia is one of their biggest health issues encountered in stock during the housing period. Poor ventilation in sheds has been sighted as one of the primary causes. Housed animals need to be able to breathe in fresh clean air to thrive and remain healthy. If sheds are warm and stuffy alterations may need to be made to improve air circulation. Leaving doors open or creating a draught at the level of the animal is not the answer as draughts are just as bad, if not worse, than poor air movement and stuffy conditions. Ideally in sheds air should move in from the sides above the level of the animals removing gases, odours, dust, bacteria, heat and moisture generated by the animals in the house.

Water

It may be last on the list but it is by no means least important, clean drinking water is every bit as important as good quality silage or any dosing programme. Cattle have a huge requirement for water while housed, with suckler cows drinking between 40 and 70 litres daily, depending on size. Finishing cattle on a high concentrate diet will drink similar volumes. Therefore, it is important water-troughs are checked daily to ensure cattle have access to clean water. If drinking troughs become soiled with forage or animal faeces, they should be cleaned immediately. Cattle will drink less if the water is dirty, meaning they will eat less, therefore animal performance will suffer.