

Grazing in November

Edited by
Joe Patton,
Head of Dairy Knowledge Transfer

When should you stop grazing and house cows and stock for the winter period? For farms with heavy land the answer is usually dictated by ground conditions, but for drier farms the temptation to keep grazing will be strong this year. However, the right answer for all farm types will mean lots of grass next spring and cows out grazing early (in an average spring it's worth close to €300 per day for 100 cows). This sets up the cows and the swards for reaching their potential through the next grazing season. Having enough grass in spring 2023 will pay

dividends the whole year, so knowing when to stop grazing now is crucial, as most of the grass available in the spring is grown in the autumn. The average farm cover (AFC) targets are shown in **Table 1**. Use them to take the guesswork out of housing stock. Know the one that's one too many – don't be tempted to graze the next paddock to the detriment of next year's cow performance. **Table 1** shows the AFC targets for December 1 for various stocking rates. It also highlights where the AFC should be on November 15 to reach the December 1 target.

Table 1: AFC targets for November and December.

Stocking rate (LU/ha)	AFC on November 15 (kg DM/ha)	Closing AFC December 1 (kg DM/ha)
2.5	500	650
3.0	550	700
3.5	600	750

Selective approach to drying cows off

Teagasc and Animal Health Ireland (AHI) ran 13 drying off on-farm events with the co-ops around the country in recent weeks. At them, we suggested that cows with an average annual SCC of less than 100,000 cells/ml and no clinical cases of mastitis could make suitable candidates for drying off without dry cow antibiotics. Antibiotic resistance in human medicine is prompting this change. Legislation restricting antibiotic use at dry-off was introduced in January 2022. A number of clear messages came from the events:

- a surgical hygiene standard is needed when drying off cows with antibiotics – this is even more important when selectively drying off cows – the last cow needs the

same level of care and attention at drying off as the first;

- take milk samples from some of your high-SCC cows to identify the bacteria causing their infection and the antibiotics that they are vulnerable to – around one cow in every 10 should be sampled; and,
- if you haven't milk recorded this year, make sure to take milk samples from your cows now to establish their SCC before they're dried off.

A free drying off consultation is available through the Targeted Advisory Service for Animal Health (TASAH) programme. A list of laboratories, the consultation application form, and videos from the drying off webinars are available on the AHI website.

Making the best use of part-time workers

Failure to offer regular working hours has come up as a major barrier to successfully finding employees for dairy farms. The agri-employment agencies report a huge number of calls from farmers in early spring looking for help for a couple of months, with little or no plan for the rest of the year. Employees need regular work and to know when this work is available, so that they can plan around this. A frequent comment from dairy farmers who offer regular part-time work throughout the year is that it reduces the stress of scrambling to secure help every spring.

Also the extra help during times where workload is reduced gives the farm owner an opportunity to get a break and also get jobs

done that have been put on the long finger.

Do the regular part-time hours have to completely suit the employee and not the employer? No, but here is where communication, compromise and flexibility are vital. For example, if an employee prefers evening milking but the farmer would like to get a morning milking done then this needs to be discussed. Can the person milk one morning per week for example? Explore ways around such issues and reach a compromise.

Most spring-calving herds are within 80 days of the start of calving and there is plenty of work to be done in the meantime, so getting the required part-time help secured sooner rather than later is advised.

National Dairy Conference 2022

After a three-year absence, this year's Teagasc National Dairy Conference makes a welcome return to a full conference format. It is scheduled for December 6 in the Rochestown Park Hotel in Cork, and December 8 in the Mullingar Park Hotel, Co. Westmeath. The theme of the conference is 'Turning challenges into opportunities'. Leading farmers and researchers will share insights on maintaining farm pasture productivity at lower nitrogen (N) inputs, while the potential for

technology to deliver a higher-value calf crop will be explored. The Conference will also feature updates and practical discussion on technical topics such as production costs for 2023, reducing SCC, and improving labour efficiency in the milking parlour. It is a great opportunity to meet fellow dairy farmers and join the discussion on the key issues facing the sector today. Further programme details and booking are available at www.teagasc.ie.

Manage body condition in late lactation

Having cows in the correct body condition score (BCS) of 3.0 to 3.25 (fit but not fat) at calving is essential for trouble-free calving next year. The process starts in late lactation. The primary tools for BCS management in late lactation are dry period length and feed intake/quality. However, with high milk prices this autumn, there is a risk that some farms will milk cows for too long and BCS targets will be missed.

At the standard 60 to 75 days dry, cows at BCS 2.75 at drying off and eating average quality (68-70 DMD) silage will be at target BCS calving down. Where BCS and/or silage quality are below target, extending the dry period should be considered. Over-target (fat) cows may need their

silage restricted depending on silage quality. Allow first lactation animals 90 days dry. Herd average BCS is not particularly useful for herd management – focus instead on using BCS of individual animals and make decisions on a cow-by-cow basis. Act early to have cows in the correct BCS next spring:

- assess quality and quantity of feed available;
- assess the BCS of each cow in the herd in early November;
- identify the calving date and subsequent dry-off date for each cow;
- assign each cow to a management plan to meet the target BCS of 3.25 at calving; and,
- batch cows according to BCS over the winter period.

Update on fertiliser 2023

A sub-group of the National Fodder and Food Security Committee met recently to discuss potential challenges around the fertiliser supply chain facing into spring 2023. Some key messages arising were:

- farmers need to be aware that there is a significant risk of reduced fertiliser availability in spring-summer 2023;
- at individual farm level, fertiliser requirements for 2023 should be assessed, factoring in the

need to build sufficient fodder reserves;

- dairy farmers should consider securing 25-30% of their total annual fertiliser requirement for 2023 over the coming weeks, where cash flow and other factors specific to the farm allow; and,
- farmers should focus on sourcing their phosphorus (P) fertiliser requirements for spring 2023 as soon as possible.

12 STEPS TO REDUCING EMISSIONS

Over the next 12 months, this newsletter will outline one action per month farmers can take to reduce their emissions.



Step 1: Optimise soil pH

How does this reduce emissions?

Applying chemical nitrogen (N) to land releases nitrous oxide (N₂O), which is a big contributor to emissions in agriculture. By getting soil pH right on dairy farms, up to 80kg of N per hectare can be made available in the soil. If soil N availability increases with liming, you will need to apply less fertiliser and farm emissions will decline.

Is there a gain for me?

Improving soil pH increases grass production annually, releases up to 80kg N/ha/year, unlocks soil phosphorus (P) and potassium (K), and increases the response to freshly applied N, P and K. The return on investment is €6-10 for every €1 spent on liming.

What action do I take?

Test your soil to identify fields that have a low soil pH. Create a plan to apply lime to these fields next year. Reduce chemical N use in line with the liming you do.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Over 4,500 farm accidents occur annually



Research from the Teagasc National Farm Survey (NFS) has revealed that there were 4,523 accidents on Irish farms during 2020. The data shows over 88% of these accidents involved the farm operator, with a further 11% relating to family members. Farm workers accounted for the remaining 1%. In almost half of cases (47%) the injured persons required more than a three-day absence from farm work, the threshold for legal accident reporting. Over 20% were out of work for between four and 10 days, with 6% unable to work for 11 to 60 days. Close to one-fifth (19%) of those involved in farm accidents

lost 61 or more days of work. Correspondingly, 19% did not lose work time. This data illustrates clearly the impact a farm accident has on the farmer, the farm family, and the farm business. It is important to take action on your farm to prevent these accidents. Reduced daylight hours over the coming weeks will make it vitally important to plan tasks properly and make allowances for colder weather. Pay particular attention to lighting around the farmyard and on tractors and farm vehicles. Good preparation is essential to cut risks.