

Opportunities for greater



Completing the evening milking earlier is good for the farmer and helps recruit and retain employees

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Milk recording data from 2,366 herds across 23 counties shows that the average milking finish time was 6.43pm and the length of the working day was nearly 12 hours (Table 1). There is huge variation, but fewer than one in four farms were finished the afternoon milking by 6pm.

The main reasons reported for later milking times include:

- Workload.
- Tradition/habit.
- Lack of hobbies.
- Milk yield loss.
- Higher SCC.
- Childcare.

‘Too much work to do’ is often cited as a reason for later milking. To get all the jobs done after morning milking, the afternoon milking must be delayed. The suggestion seems to be that if you milk early and finished at 5pm you then have to be gone out of the yard. Not so.

Milking earlier gives the option to take the evening off or go and get other jobs done. It also shows your employees, neighbours and family that dairy farming is structured and that you can be finished earlier if you choose to.

Doing things how, and when, we have always done them is a powerful and understandable impulse. But sometimes habits and traditions come at a cost and should be challenged. Parkinson’s law says that ‘work expands to fill the time available for its completion’ so unless you set an end point you might never stop working.

Concerns about milk yield and SCC were mentioned. We analysed the 2,366 herds and found no difference in yield or SCC between cows that were milked in a 16:8hr (7am and 15pm) interval compared to cows milked in a 12:12hr (6am and 18pm) interval.

As spring has the greatest workload

on most farms, we analysed milking times for each season. The results showed no difference in milking times by season.

The farm milking time in spring was exactly the same in summer, autumn and winter. This strongly points to milking times being a tradition/habit on many farms.

Childcare is a genuine reason for some farmers having to milk later and this is down to the stage of the family. As the family gets older milking times can be changed to allow for an earlier finish time.

Table 1: Mean milking time data from 2,366 herds recorded in 2020

	Average
Start milking AM	07:23
Finish milking AM	08:55
Start milking PM	17:14
Finish milking PM	18:43
Time spent milking (hrs)	02:58
Milking interval (hrs)	09:48
Length of working day (hrs) (milking start am to finish PM milking time)	11:47
Herd size (number of cows)	118

flexibility on dairy farms



A HIGHLY EFFECTIVE TEAM:

Greg Butler, Eleri George, Michael Bryson (John Whelan's business partner), Kay O'Connell, Teagasc, John Whelan and Stephen Whelan.

Farmer focus: earlier evening milking

John and Margaret Whelan farm in Ballygarvan, Gusserane, Co Wexford. "We have four children, Stephen, Sean, Katie and Padraig," says John. Initially, we milked 16 cows plus tillage with my uncle on his farm. The farm has expanded and today we are farming on the home farm in Ballygarvan with our son Stephen and in partnership on two other dairy farms. "When the home farm expanded to 120 cows 10 years ago, we began employing outside help. It was only then when we started to look at our milking times.

"We were milking at 7am in the morning and 5pm in the evening. By the time cows were milked and wash up done, it was 7pm.

"Paying wages and attracting staff were the drivers which made us change. We switched to 3pm milking start time. Staff are now finished work by between 5.30pm to 6pm."

John says that a key benefit to the earlier evening milking is that if there is a sick cow, she is identified at 3pm and the vet is called straight away.

Continuing, John said: "Being honest I didn't make the change for myself but I have also benefited. After milking I go in for the dinner around 5.30pm, catch up with the family and go back out if I need to or want to. I have the flexibility to do this particularly outside of the calving season.

"My children play sport so milking being finished before 6pm fits in well with training and matches. "I am not into watching TV, I really enjoy farming and I do work hard but I also take time off."

John's hobby is ploughing and he has represented Ireland in locations as diverse as Kenya and Finland and has won three world-ploughing titles and 12 national titles. "I often go out after milking and practice," he says.

"I take off four weeks each year for ploughing competitions and we always go on a yearly family holiday, which is booked in January.

"I did my homework before making the change and was confident there was no negatives to earlier milking," adds John.

"Milk solids or SCC have not been effected in anyway. On average milk solids for last year between the three farms was 540kg/cow (6,316 L, 4.7 f% & 3.6p%) with an 8% empty rate.

"There is one cow doing 53 litres/day at present and last year 25 cows



John Whelan.

on the home farm delivered 700kg ms/cow."

John and his team start milking at 6.30am. He uses a back latch and says he finds it to be a good time-saver. "We have a high number of rows going through the parlour and this is the reason for our start time. If there were fewer rows of cows we'd start milking at 7am."

The earlier milking also lends itself to time management. "We have to be ready for 3pm," says John.

"There is no point in starting at 6.30am and then messing about during the day. I have done every farm task on the farm, learnt the hard way on some occasions and this has made me more time conscious.

"I know how long it takes to get jobs done. A job that requires less time is given to the person milking. If on the odd occasion, I get the time wrong or something does not go to plan, milking is prioritised and the job will be finished the next day.

"So I am realistic when delegating tasks. It's a balancing act between getting the job done well and also not putting people under too much pressure."

Staff attraction and retention is good on the farm. "Everyone won't do a task in exactly the same you will do it, but that doesn't matter if they get the same result," says John.

"We aim to recruit good people and treat them well. We find that leads to a relaxed atmosphere where we don't need to be constantly telling people what to do. They know what needs doing and get on with it."

John says that you have to be a good role model for staff and family by working hard and smart. "It also means quitting at a reasonable hour," he concludes.

In short

Earlier milking has the following benefits:

- Allows farmers to continue to work hard while taking time off.
- Flexibility and better staff attraction and retention.
- Structure to the working day and better time management.