

## Top five tips for March



*The first milk recording will allow for early identification of subclinical mastitis.*

1. Milk recording – if you have not done a milk recording within 60 days of the first cow calving, you lose valuable information in relation to your dry cow therapy performance. While challenging in the middle of calving, this key milk recording will allow for early identification of subclinical mastitis in your herd. Early intervention is key to prevent spread.
2. Meeting heifer weights throughout the rearing phase is a key component of profitable dairy farming. Well-reared heifers milk more and have better survival than heifers that are underweight. Target weight for breeding is 290-330kg for JEX, FR, and Hol Fr for maximum fertility performance. Early

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ABOUT  
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turnout of light heifers along with 2kg of concentrate will deliver gains >1kg a day, which will facilitate hitting target weight.

3. Continue to record problems at calving, such as milk fever and/or difficult calving, ketosis, mastitis or lameness. These cows are at risk of poor reproductive performance in the upcoming breeding season. Early intervention will increase submission rate and overall in-calf rate. February problem cows can be presented for examination in mid to late March.
4. Assess body condition – cows that lose >0.5 body condition score (BCS) in early lactation have reduced reproductive

performance. Identify thin cows that should be put on once-a-day (OAD) milking to improve condition. Late-calving cows (March 25, 2025 onwards) should also be milked OAD if you wish to retain them for the 2026 milking year.

5. Select the cows that you want to breed from and pick your AI bull team. Use the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation's (ICBF) Sire Advice to match the bulls to the cows for both dairy and beef. Sire Advice prevents inbreeding, balances milk and fertility, and matches beef bulls to cows to minimise risk of calving difficulty. Sire Advice is a must.

## Choose the right cows for breeding

Much time and effort is put into choosing the AI bull each year and rightly so; however, are you putting as much effort into choosing the right cows to breed from? Ultimately, the bull is only half the story, and choosing the right cows is also vital. With a slowdown in herd expansion, and increased use of sexed semen, there is now scope to be more selective in the cows we breed replacement heifers from.

It is now very common to see surplus heifers being carried in herds each year, substantially increasing replacement costs. The target replacement rate for a stable herd size is 18-20%. Allowing for losses up to breeding, 22 dairy heifers born per 100 cows is a more appropriate target. For an example 100-cow herd, all dairy semen sexed, aiming to have 22 dairy heifers born:

- 18 replacement heifers bred will produce



*The bull is only half the story when it comes to breeding.*

10 dairy heifer calves (18 heifers x 60% conception x 90% female); and,

- 27-30 sexed dairy straws will need to be used on the cows to produce the additional 12 dairy heifers required (12 calves required x 50% conception x 90% female).

As can be seen in the example above, only 27-30 sexed dairy straws are required to be used on the cows. However, where synchronisation or twice a day AI is not being carried out, it would be appropriate to select

a slightly larger number of cows to have available for breeding replacements, as some cows will not be at the optimum breeding time when AI is taking place in this scenario, and should therefore not receive sexed semen. Even taking this into account, it is clear that less than half of the cows in the herd will be required for breeding replacement heifers.

Taking time now to identify the top 50% of your herd to breed from using Economic Breeding Index (EBI) and milk recording data, will have a large positive effect on the genetic merit and subsequent performance of next year's replacement heifer calves. The balance of the herd can be bred to high merit beef sires to produce saleable calves.

## Keep grass in the diet

The aim now must be to keep grass in the diet of dairy cows as much as possible during March. This month can be very costly where

grass is not in the diet, as cow intake increases. Silage supplies can also run tight. Therefore, trying to graze is essential. There are many reasons for this but primarily it is to:

- increase milk price (higher fat and protein composition);
- increase milk yield;
- lower the cost of milk production; and,
- grow more grass and increase grass quality in subsequent rotations.

When ground conditions are difficult, then practices have to be put in place to keep grass in the diet of the cow without causing serious damage to the land. These practices include:

- grazing for a few hours after each milking;
- using different entry and exit points to the paddock; and,
- grazing lower covers of grass in difficult grazing conditions.

## Safety at calving

Almost one third (32%) of farm fatalities involving livestock are from cows with calves, and over 50% of non-fatal farm injuries are associated with livestock handling.



*Watch cows with calves carefully.*

### Calving pens

Good facilities and good underfoot non-slip conditions are all essential requirements. Always keep a strong gate between you and the freshly calved

cow/heifer, particularly when handling, treating or removing the calf.

### Mind your back

The lambing and calving period can be demanding on the body. Avoid heavy lifting and awkward postures. Use gates, pens and lifting aids, and always seek help when needed. For more information, see: [https://www.hsa.ie/eng/publications\\_and\\_forms/publications/agriculture\\_and\\_forestry/farm\\_safety\\_during\\_calving.pdf](https://www.hsa.ie/eng/publications_and_forms/publications/agriculture_and_forestry/farm_safety_during_calving.pdf).

## HEALTH AND SAFETY

## March grazing targets

The aim is to have about 55-65% of the farm grazed by St Patrick's Day, according to the standard spring rotation planner. While the rotation planner tracks the proportion of the farm grazed, it does not tell us about the supply of grass available. It also gives no information about the levels of regrowth. Regrowth levels must be tracked from mid March. Watch the recovery of the first paddocks grazed, and walk the farm to ensure that there is enough grass available in April to start the second rotation. On farms with a higher stocking rate and/or later spring growth patterns, maybe push the target start of the second round to mid April. Talk to your advisor about what will work for you.



*Watch the recovery of the first paddocks grazed closely.*

Follow the grass growth rates on the PastureBase Ireland website: [www.pbi.ie](http://www.pbi.ie). For those who measure grass, the average farm cover should not drop below 600kg DM/ha at any time during spring, otherwise growth will be compromised.

## Costs and drivers of profit margin

Teagasc advisors and dairy farmer clients have completed over 1,000 profit monitors this spring, generating a huge resource for examining drivers of costs and margins. Some key summary points to date are:

- the top one-third of profitable farms generated over €1,300 per farm hectare higher profit than the lowest third;
- milking platform stocking rate and whole farm stocking rates were similar for the top and lower profit groups at 2.95 and 2.14LU per ha, respectively;
- the higher margin group produced 51kg more milk solids per cow, while concentrate input per cow was very

similar between the groups. The difference in herd performance was driven by a combination of higher pasture intake and quality, superior herd fertility and genetics; and,

- fixed costs spending on machinery leasing and running costs was lower for high-profit farms.

We will publish a full report on the figures in April, but it is clear from the provisional data that a focus on keeping more high-quality grass in the herd diet pays dividends. Keep this front and centre when making management decisions shortly.