

Top five tips for April



Sulphur can play an important part in your fertiliser plan.

1. Grass quality – target cows grazing high-quality covers of 1,200-1,400kg DM/ha in 36-hour paddocks. A 100-cow herd requires a 2ha paddock for three grazings. Herd size now often exceeds paddock size. Adjust paddock sizes to keep grass of the right quality and quantity in front of cows.
2. Breeding – select your best Economic Breeding Index (EBI) cows to breed replacements from rather than breeding all cows to dairy in the first weeks. Use Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (ICBF) sire advice to select cows for dairy breeding, culling, and beef breeding.

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herd will require a
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three grazings.

3. Heifers – ensure your heifers are at target weight for bulling (60% of mature weight). When using a synchronisation protocol, this is vital. Put heifers on the best quality grass before and during breeding.
4. In recent years meal feeding, particularly in mid season, has increased with higher stocking rates. Target a saving of 1kg of meal/cow/day in April-July. This could

increase your profit by 10-15% in 2024. There is no research evidence to support the idea that this will have any negative impact on breeding outcomes.

5. Fertiliser sulphur (S) – there is a response to increased grass growth where S is included in fertiliser plan. Apply approximately 20kg per ha, split across March to May fertiliser rounds.

Stocking rates and closing for silage

As we come out of a difficult spring, it is important to offer the herd top quality grass every day to maximise production and give cows every opportunity to go back in calf. This means setting your stocking rate to have the flexibility to manage farm covers and pre-grazing sward quality. You should also be forward planning silage stocks for next winter. However, we should not compromise on grazing targets to meet this second objective.

We have seen farms closing too much grazing area in an attempt to bulk silage cuts, increasing stocking rates up to 4.5 to five cows per ha in the short term. Such farms often end up running higher pre-grazing covers to try to maintain rotation length. This is a mistake – pre-grazing covers of 1,400kg (3 leaf stage) are the optimum, irrespective of stocking rate. The result is difficulty in cleaning out paddocks. There is no scope to correct quality, so third and fourth round sward quality can suffer too.



Forward plan winter's silage stocks now.

Risks

The risk of short-term feed deficits increases. Cows are fed 3-5kg of meal to maintain stocking rate when grass should be plentiful. Cows may be also 'pinched' for intake. So, where to pitch stocking rate? Base this on expected growth rate over a period of weeks and not just peak growth. If 65kg daily grass growth is a sensible average for your farm in late April to early June, then a stocking rate of around 3.8 cows per ha should be close to maximum. This gives a 17kg grass allowance per day, scope to deal with short-term deficits, and room to correct quality by cutting surplus paddocks. Silage reserves should be made up from external blocks instead of hitting cow performance at peak.

Reduce TB risk

The following are Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) guidelines on reducing the risk of TB in your herd. The advice on reducing herd-wildlife contact is particularly important:

- only buy animals from low-risk herds, that is herds that have not had an outbreak of TB in recent years, ideally not within the last five years;
- cull any animal that was inconclusive in a past TB test – these are high risk of being a source of residual infection, which can lead to larger outbreaks;
- cull those that were cohorts of reactors;
- use AI bulls with higher levels of TB resistance;
- identify and fence off badger setts to ensure cattle do not have access;
- ensure all feed stores and water troughs are inaccessible to badgers;
- the Badger Activity app allows farmers to assist the Department in locating setts



Keep animals away from badger setts when out grazing.

- and extending the vaccination programme (the Department has provided farmers with the locations of identified badger setts on their farmed lands on Basic Income Support for Sustainability (BISS) maps in 2024);
- practice good biosecurity on farms to ensure cattle-to-cattle contact with neighbouring farms does not occur and minimise the risk from introducing TB to farms through other means; and,
- provide good testing facilities to ensure veterinary practitioners can carry out TB testing of the highest standard.

More information on TB can be found at: www.bovinetb.ie.



HEALTH AND
SAFETY

Fertiliser safety

Spreading fertiliser can be high risk. Consider if a contractor can help. Keep fertiliser spreading equipment in good condition. Bulk or big bag options minimise the need for manual lifting but you need the appropriate equipment. Beware of damaged bags, as they can become unstable, cause sudden movement, and collapse. Your lifting hook should have well-rounded edges. Never stand under or close to raised bags or leave bulk bags hanging in the air unattended. Always lower lifting equipment safely when the task is complete. Use a long-handled knife when opening the bag. All 50kg fertiliser bags should be lifted by two people. Bags should be placed at waist height to reduce bending. Use good manual handling techniques.

Getting value from the DBI

The Dairy Beef Index (DBI) is a breeding index for Irish beef and dairy farmers to promote high-quality beef cattle bred from the dairy herd. On average, 49% of an animal's DBI will come from calving traits, with the remaining 51% coming from beef value traits. Where a bull is extremely good on a particular trait (e.g., calving difficulty), almost all its index could come from that trait. With that in mind, it is good practice to look at some key traits.

- **Calving difficulty:** is the expected incidence of calving difficulty acceptable for your herd and the females being mated? If you are mating cows, use the dairy cow calving difficulty figure, not the dairy heifer figure.
- **Gestation:** shorter gestations are most desirable. However, consider using longer gestation bulls early in the breeding season, provided they excel in other traits.



Calving difficulty is one aspect of the DBI to be aware of.

- **Carcass merit:** select bulls with the highest figures for carcass weight and conformation. The higher the beef sub-index in the DBI of a bull, the higher the Commercial Beef Value (CBV) of his future progeny.

Table 1 outlines the minimum required dairy beef sub-index of Angus and Hereford beef bulls to achieve a four- or five-star CBV dairy-beef calf, categorised by dairy herd ranking on the Economic Breeding Index (EBI) beef sub-index.

Table 1: Achieving a four- or five-star CBV dairy-beef calf.

Dairy		Minimum DBI sub-index required to produce a:	
Rank on EBI beef sub-index	EBI beef sub-index value	Four-star CBV calf	Five-star CBV calf
Bottom 20%	-€18	>€90	>€130
Bottom 40%	-€9	>€82	>€120
Average	-€5	>€78	>€116
Top 40%	-€2	>€75	>€113
Top 20%	€2	>€71	>€110