

Top five tips for July



Complete a feed budget for the coming winter.

1. Winter feed budget: with more fodder used than normal last winter, and relatively poor grass growth to date this year, it is important to complete a feed budget for the coming winter. Acting early will leave more options available to rectify the situation.
2. Keep focused on grass: it is important to continue to walk the farm regularly to assess grass availability and quality. Target a pre-grazing yield of 1,300-1,400kg DM/ha. Maximising grass quality in front of the herd will maximise yield and allow for savings in concentrate usage.

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**TOTAL
PRODUCTION
COSTS**

HAVE INCREASED BY

56%

since 2015, with
a 100% increase
in feed.

3. End the breeding season: cows bred in July will not calve until mid to late April. Late-calving cows are less profitable – minimise the late tail on next year's calving season by sticking to your planned end of breeding season date.
4. Plan for oversowing clover: identify paddocks that you would like to

oversow with clover next year. Use the remainder of this year to rectify pH and weed issues to have the best possible chance for success next year.

5. Take time off: it has been a tough year both physically and mentally for farmers and their families. Arrange to take some time off to recharge your batteries.

Grass quality issues

Grass quality has become a persistent problem for the last few weeks, largely driven by the poor weather conditions. This has resulted in more stemming of grass and less tillering; this is why we have open and stemmy swards prevailing now. Milk protein content has been much lower than normal, as it is very sensitive to grass quality and particularly digestibility. The changes in digestibility of grass are associated with changes in the amount of green leaf, mature stem and dead material. July is the 'clean-up' month before we start



Grass quality has struggled this year.

building grass supply in August. Every effort must be made to improve sward clean-out by the herd. Mechanical correction may be necessary to achieve the proper residuals. Ideally, this should be done by removing poorer quality grass paddocks in the form of baled silage within the grazing rotation.

Potash needs to be returned

The capability of grass to grow starts below the surface. If the major elements of phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) are compromised, less grass will be grown. A lot of soils are index 1 or 2 for K, and are therefore deficient in this element. This is particularly true of silage ground. However, this is now becoming more common on the grazing area. There are three reasons for this:

1. Not enough compound fertiliser is being spread.

2. Swards harvested for bales (surplus grass) are removing K (every four bales/ac removes about 24 units of K).
3. Soils deficient in lime will 'lock up' K in the soil.

However, there are no regulatory limits on the quantity (or timing) of K applications. There are now many fertiliser products available that have nitrogen (N), K and sulphur (S) with no P, e.g., 29:0:15+S, that will help replenish K.

Have realistic expectations of new employees

Finding good employees is a challenge for all industries, not just dairy farming. It is commonly said that because finding employees is a challenge, employing any available person is better than having nobody at all. Is this true?

The answer is probably no in many cases, but it depends on the specific situation. A few farmers have said they had to initially lower their expectations and work with the person to build their strengths. Overall, the employees had a good attitude, and it did work out over time. For other farmers, having invested a considerable amount in training a new person, they felt frustrated and were not comfortable delegating more responsibility to the employee.

Lessons learnt:

- use a trial period (probation) to see if the person is the right fit for your farm – this is a fixed period during which a new employee's performance and suitability for a job are assessed – a probationary period can last up to six months;
- if the person is not the right fit, take clear and objective action before the end of the six-month probation; and,
- long-term frustration will lead to arguments, which do no good for either party – your reputation as an employer is at risk if these situations are not well managed.



A trial period is useful with any employee.

There are many great examples of successful full-time and part-time employments on dairy farms. Expecting every employment to be a success is not realistic. Accept that sometimes it will not work out even though you thought it would. Continue to manage all interactions in a manner that upholds a good reputation. Hours, pay, conditions, facilities, communication and respect are essential to become and remain an employer of choice. Often these are taken for granted. Farmers who provide the above tend not to have issues with attracting and retaining employees. Word of mouth continues to rank high for many dairy farmers when finding employees. Therefore, people must know that you are hiring. This is happening through social media groups, farm walks, group meetings, one-to-one conversations, and advertisements. All avenues should be considered.

Getting more from your own figures

We recently hosted farmer representatives from over 60 dairy discussion groups at a workshop in Teagasc Moorepark. Topics covered were margins and costs of production, N and clover, and getting more from discussion group meetings. In the costs session, Patrick Gowing and Laurence Shaloo analysed the numbers for the participating groups – information from about 700 farms. Some clear messages emerged when comparing high- versus low-margin farms:

- total production costs have increased by 56% since 2015, with a 100% increase in feed;
- there is a huge range in farm profit, with the top 10% being €500 per cow ahead of average and the bottom 10% being €500 per cow below average in 2023; and,

- higher margin farms:
 - had €250 per cow lower variable costs and €300 per cow lower fixed costs;
 - had tighter cost control across nearly all categories;
 - produced 70kg milk solids per cow more for less purchased feed input; and,
 - utilised more pasture per hectare and achieved higher grass intakes per cow.

A striking feature of the day was the variability in costs, performance and resulting profits from the farms. Differences were down to farm-to-farm decisions, not location or soil type. With tight margins occurring on many farms, the underlying drivers of cost and profit should be regularly examined, individually or as part of discussion group meetings.

Upcoming events for dairy farmers

This month is a good time to take time to attend farm walks and events. Some dates for your diary are:

- Wednesday, July 10 – Tipperary calf-to-beef demo farm open day, Fethard;
- Tuesday, July 16 – Johnstown Castle Open Day, Wexford; and,
- Wednesday, July 24 – Ballyhaise Open Day, Cavan.

Check the Teagasc website for more local dairy events.



There are lots of dairy events on around the country.