Coping with snow: tips for dairy farmers

The recent snow has increased the physical workload on dairy farmers, at an already busy time of the year. In addition, it can also be hard emotionally on farming families and people working on dairy farms, as they cope with the freezing conditions. The tips below will help you to deal with snow in early lactation.

Immediate actions:

- Ensure the safety of family and staff; farms are already dangerous places to work and they have become even more dangerous to be with the snow
- All stock will need feed and water, but especially water. Milking cows especially will need access to water. Early lactation cows will consume 2.5 – 3.0 litres water per litre of milk produced. Check the supply in sheds regularly and make provision for alternative sources if shed supply is prone to freezing e.g. plastic drinkers
- Check in with neighbours to see that they are ok; if you need help, don't be afraid to ask.
- Monitor the local radio for news and information

Next priorities:

- Milking once a day until the worst of the weather is past might be a smart move. Many farmers were already doing this during February. Milking once a day will allow you time for other priorities and will reduce the yield of the cows somewhat
- Feed stock; prioritise the highest quality silage for the milking cows (this is likely to be surplus bales made in May/ June last year)
- With cows rehoused, farmers will need to increase supplementation by 2 – 3 kg/head/day to compensate for loss of spring grass
- Check and clear driveways to allow access for trucks and other vehicles
- Monitor SCCs and watch for mastitis – with cows rehoused and perhaps being milked OAD, you can expect higher SCCs and increased cases of clincial mastitis
- Regarding the parlour freezing, farmers should thoroughly drain the plant after every milking and, where possible/ necessary (very open parlours), have hot air blowers or infra-red lamps to keep the lines from freezing
- If a farmer cannot drain his milking machine fully, then an option is to leave a salt solution in the milking line at the rate of 0.5 kg salt per 5 gallons of water, but this must be rinsed before milking to remove salt traces
- From a milk collection point of view and tanker access, farmers should have grit or salt in place

    - But there will have been very few collections (if any) on Friday; processors are saying that they will resume collections as soon as it is safe to do so, but that it may take a few days to work through the backlog
    - Keep in touch with your milk processor for updates
- Sloped/high traffic yard areas for stock should be cleaned in advance of snow and treated with salt; focus on keeping the areas where the cows walk clear of snow

After the snow melts:

- Once the snow melts, cows can return to grass and more normal levels of supplementation.
- Paddocks will be wet once the snow melts so you have to be prepared to graze drier paddocks, with good access, and lower covers.
- Growth is behind target and recovery of paddocks grazed in February has been poor. So it is now likely that the end of the first rotation will have to be delayed by 5 to 7 days.

Looking after yourself:

- Make sure to wrap up well when outside
- Keep your mobile phone charged and with you at all times
- If you get wet, change your clothes when you get inside
- Eat well, drink plenty of fluids and get some rest; you will make better decisions when rested and fed
- Take help if offered…and help others if you can.

If short of concentrates (meal bin close to empty and no chance of a delivery)

- Prioritise available concentrates to milking cows and withdraw from other (non-priority) stock

If running short of fodder

- Neighbours may be able to help in the short-term…but fodder is begininng to get tight on some dairy farms
- Best to stretch available fodder by feeding some additional concentrates
- Be ready to get milking cows and youngstock to grass once the snow melts and the conditions allow

If you have to store milk (bulk tank full and no chance of a collection)

- Teagasc research has shown that where the initial quality of milk is of a high standard, it can be stored for up to 96 hours (if adequate storage is available) at 2°C or 4°C (temperature won't be the problem at the moment) with little effect on the microbiological status of that milk, its composition or functional properties.
- If your bulk tank is full, you really only have two options:
    - Draw off enough milk to allow for storage of next milking, add a preservative and store for future feeding to calves (other livestock)
    - Dump into slatted tank (just dump enough to make space for next milking in the expectation that you will be collected before the next milking)