

# DAIRY

February 2022

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## Early spring grass

Despite the weather and ground condition challenges that occur at this time of year, every farmer should try to get cows out grazing as early as possible (**Table 1**). Each additional day of grazing in February will increase farm profit through improved milk constituents and lower feed costs. The spring rotation planner is an excellent tool to help farmers plan spring grazing. It is designed to take the guesswork out of grazing management.

**Table 1: Spring grazing targets when grazing from early February.\***

Date	Percentage of total farm area grazed
February 1	Start grazing
March 1	30% grazed
March 17	65% grazed
April 6	Begin rotation 2

*\*These targets need to be adjusted by 7-10 days (later) for heavier/later farms.*

The spring rotation planner aims to:

- simplify spring grass management;
- include grass in the diet of the lactating cows every day during February and March;
- maximise farm grass growth;
- avoid uncertainty in relation to grass availability; and,
- set up the farm for production of high-quality grass for the following rotations.

### Graze 30% of the farm by March 1

Cows should be turned out to grass as early as possible in February. Many farmers struggle to reach this target, so grazing the paddocks with the lowest cover of grass is advised. For farms that have not done early February grazing previously, it is worth starting off with a few hours' grazing each day after each morning milking and building up from there. Pick your paddocks to get some suitable area grazed. Cows will settle into the routine after a few days.

## Somatic cell count – win the battle in early lactation

*Tús maith leath na hoibre* (a good start is half the work).

While clinical mastitis is easy to identify, subclinical mastitis can spiral out of control if left unchecked at the start of lactation. Early identification of somatic cell count (SCC) issues improves overall lactation performance.

Early milk recording will identify problem cows, but up to 90% of the herd may be calved before this happens with present calving rates. While not as accurate, early investigation using the Californian Mastitis Test (CMT) before a cow's milk goes to the bulk tank (fifth day post calving) will help identify freshly calved cows that have the potential to impact on the remainder of the herd.

At this stage, the stress of the calving process should have passed for most animals, the exception being the odd excitable heifer (not all heifers). When you CMT cows at this stage, you will have three potential outcomes/categories:

- 1 CMT is clear and that cow is suitable for milking to the tank.
- 2 CMT shows coagulation on all four quarters – this is more than likely stress related and associated with freshly calved heifers.
- 3 CMT shows coagulation on one or two quarters. This indicates high SCC/infection of these quarters.

Category 2 cows will need to be retested after a few days, but disinfect clusters in the intervening time. Category 3 animals will need treatment to address the issues identified, so discuss treatment options with your vet. These cows should be milked last or clusters will need

to be disinfected post milking to prevent any potential spread. For further information on how to perform the CMT go to:  
<https://youtu.be/OW56-5OhnRs>.



CMT paddle kit – test cows five days after calving to identify high-SCC quarters.

## Keep milk fever under control

Milk fever can cause clinical cases (downer cows) or subclinical problems (slow calving, retained placenta, displaced abomasum). If more than 5% of cows are having these problems, then it is worth checking for milk fever risks:

- high potassium (K) silage (over 2.5% K) is a major risk factor – feed a lower-K silage for two to three weeks before calving if possible, and speak to your advisor about testing mineral levels in silage if there are problems arising;
- low magnesium (Mg) levels in the diet increase risk of milk fever – feed a mineral with at least 22% added Mg; top up with extra (e.g., 20g Cal Mag) for two weeks pre calving;
- over-conditioned cows (3.50 body

condition score (BCS) or higher) have increased milk fever risk, so limit silage to 10kg DM for late-calving cows – treat individual high-BCS cows with calcium bottle/bolus at calving as required;

- low phosphorus (P) diets can cause downer cows after calving – make sure dry cow minerals and post-calving rations have added P; and,
- low vitamin D can be a problem for some herds – speak to your vet or advisor about supplement options.

Feed a high-quality dry cow mineral at the correct rate (100-120g per cow depending on the spec). Sprinkle on silage twice daily. Check the amount being fed regularly (you should know how many bags should be used per week for example). Adjust the total amount fed per day as cows calve.

## Why use protected urea in 2022?

### Reason 1

Protected urea is cheaper than CAN per unit of nitrogen (N). It may appear slightly more expensive than standard urea, but when the extra losses associated with standard urea are accounted for, protected urea is cheaper. It will give the same 'effective N' for the plant as standard urea, at a 12.0% lower spreading rate. For a 48kg application rate of effective N using protected urea, CAN or standard urea, the cost of the application is €109, €139 and €118, respectively. Protected urea is the cheapest option. The value of retaining N in protected urea that had previously been lost as ammonia in standard urea has increased

dramatically in line with increased fertiliser costs.

### Reason 2

Protected urea grows more grass in the long term. In a long-term trial at Johnstown Castle, the grass grown by protected urea was greater than that of standard urea in six out of seven years; 2018 was the exception due to drought when water was the limiting factor, not N. Protected urea grew 13% more grass on average compared to standard urea.

### Reason 3

By switching to 100% protected urea on dairy farms, total farm emissions have the potential to be reduced by 7-8% at a spreading rate of between 200 and 250kg N/ha.

## Early nitrogen fertiliser application

In the early part of the year, potential grass growth rates are low but even modest responses to fertiliser N are worthwhile, as this extra grass is a superb substitute for silage (lower feed quality) or concentrates (more expensive feed). Applying fertiliser in early spring (weather permitting) will not only grow more grass but

also help the recovery of grass after grazing. The best response to early fertiliser N application will be achieved when the soil temperature is above 5°C (and rising) and in paddocks that:

- are predominantly ryegrass;
- have been recently reseeded;
- are drier, free draining, south facing, etc.;
- have a grass cover over 500kg DM/ha; and,
- have good soil fertility.

## HEALTH & SAFETY

### Give safety first priority

In 2021, nine farm workplace deaths occurred in agriculture (crop and animal production), two in forestry and logging, and one was related to farm construction (provisional data). Thus, 12 workplace fatalities occurred on farms. Of the nine agriculture deaths, four each were in the 35-54 and 65 and older age categories, with one aged 17 years or under. Four of the farm deaths were associated with farm vehicles, three with livestock, one with a fall from height, and one due to a wound. The forestry and logging fatal injuries were associated with cutting timber on farms. The construction death related to a wall collapse during construction.

These fatalities are tragic occurrences, and our sympathies go to the bereaved. We all need to give farm safety first priority in the year ahead. From February on farms get busy, which



*Cows with calves can be dangerous.*



*Beware of tractors and other large machinery.*

increases risk. Hurry and rushing are major factors associated with farm injuries. Pay particular attention to avoiding tractor knockdown or crush injuries, or getting attacked by a cow with a newborn calf during the coming months.

