



DAIRY

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Invest in soil fertility this autumn

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In the last 12 months, Teagasc has tested over 21,000 soil samples on client dairy farms. This is an 11% increase on 2021 and continues the welcome year-on-year trend of more farms sampling their soil. Compared to 2020, the main results for soil pH, phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) in 2021 on dairy farms were:

- 16% of soils have optimum pH, P and K (3% lower average value than 2020);
- 53% of soils with a soil pH >6.2 (10% lower than 2020);
- 55% of soils at P index 1 and 2 (4% lower than 2020); and,
- 48% of soils at K Index 1 and 2 (no change).

While the decline in the average figures may be in part due to more farms taking up soil

sampling, the overall picture shows much room for improvement. Despite the current price of fertiliser, investing in soil P and K indices and pH makes excellent economic sense because it improves nitrogen (N) use efficiency and lowers purchased feed bills. It is also key to reducing greenhouse gas emissions from dairy systems. Now is a good time to take corrective action:

- take fresh soil samples from the farm;
- consult with your Teagasc advisor on allowable P applications and to plan fertiliser for 2023;
- assess field P and K indices and pH status;
- apply lime in the coming weeks to address pH issues – liming low-pH soils gives a large return on investment; and,
- apply K to low index fields, especially where heavy silage crops have been taken.

Feed and fodder update

The last month has seen some challenging weather on farms, with many areas experiencing poor grass growth due to drought conditions. This has impacted on the volume of second-cut silage and the amount of silage reserves available. Grass build-up for the autumn has also been delayed. Over the next few weeks, it is essential that dairy farms take steps to ensure good grass supply for autumn and adequate feed for winter:

- build farm grass cover to 1,000-1,150kg per ha by late September, depending on soil type – this will extend the grazing season and allow the farm to be closed at the correct cover; and,
- complete a winter feed budget measuring stocks on hand and likely feed demand. Offload some lower-value stock if short, e.g., empty culls – this is not a year to be short of silage.

Dry cow events autumn 2022

The earliest spring-calving cows are now within about 65 days of their target drying-off date. It is important to begin planning for this process. Some practical steps are:

- body condition score (BCS) – thin cows and all first lactation heifers need more days dry – assess the herd in late September and identify earlier-calving cows that may need extra days dry;
- silage test – test silage for DMD in mid September to help with planning dry-off dates – low DMD silage will mean less scope for regaining condition when cows are dry, so thin cows need extra days dry; too high DMD will mean risk of over-conditioning – test for minerals to identify any possible issues early; and,
- milk recording – having up-to-date somatic cell count (SCC) data on each cow will mean better decisions on dry cow therapy can be made. Book a recording for September to identify high SCC/high-risk

cows in good time before drying off commences.

Teagasc, in partnership with Animal Health Ireland (AHI) and in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) and dairy processors, will run a series of on-farm events from October 3-19 around the country. The purpose of these events is to showcase best practice around drying off and assist farmers with selective drying-off strategies in light of changes to the legislation in the use of antibiotics. Topics under the spotlight are nutrition of the cow around the time of drying off, correct administration of tubes, the latest on selective dry cow therapy and what steps you can take to selectively dry off cows safely, including details of how to apply for a free dry cow consultation. Further information on the events, dates and venues will be available on the Teagasc and AHI websites in the coming weeks.

Joined up thinking on dairy-beef systems

With pregnancy scanning being completed on farms, it is a good time to conduct a review of the



breeding season just gone. As well as looking at six-week and overall pregnancy rates, the balance of dairy and beef genetics used in the herd should be examined also. Are there opportunities to use more high-Dairy Beef Index (DBI) beef genetics and higher quality dairy straws next year?

A good example of the benefits of integrated thinking on dairy-beef breeding is the system of Richard, Liam and Mike Long. A participant in Teagasc's DairyBeef 500 Programme, Richard carries approximately 100 calves to beef each year in a mixed steer and heifer system in Co. Waterford. All calves are sourced from his brothers Liam and Mike, who operate a dairy enterprise across the border in Co. Tipperary.

Producing a quality carcass with lower days to slaughter, while protecting calving ease and gestation length, are the agreed goals. The collective has developed a strategy to achieve this by careful selection of AI sires using the DBI, matched to the correct cows in the herd. A bull team positive on carcass weight and conformation, while providing relatively easy calving and short gestation was decided upon. This includes a mixture of Angus and Hereford genetics, with some Continental breeds also. The beef AI sire team of the 2022 calf crop had an average DBI value of €95

(€59-126), a calving ease of 5.2% (3.5-7.9%) for dairy cows, a gestation length of -0.3 days (-2.47-3.72 days), a carcass weight of +20kg (4.2-40kg), and a conformation score of 1.67 (0.64-2.87).

Sires with the slightly higher calving difficulty scores are targeted only at older, mature cows, with a proven history of calving ease. Continental sires are used only in the first half of the breeding season, while shorter-gestation sires are mated in the second half of the breeding season to protect the herd's calving interval. Using this approach, the quality of dairy and beef calves has been improved to the mutual benefit of both farms.

Richard will host an open day just outside Ballymacarbry, Co. Waterford (Eircode: E91 VH67), on September 8 at 3.00pm.



Integrated thinking on dairy-beef breeding brings many benefits.

September in numbers

2 tonnes of lime per acre spread where soil pH is low

5.10% and 4.10% at least – for milk fat and protein, respectively

8 hours between morning and evening milking (7.00am and 3.00pm for example)

100 maximum for SCC (milk record if higher than this)

120% of winter feed requirement on hand

190kg – heifer calf target weight for late September (580kg mature weight)

1,100kg DM – average farm grass cover by end of month

HEALTH & SAFETY

Maintaining wellbeing

Wellbeing is vital for ongoing satisfaction with life, yet rural dwellers report lower levels of wellbeing than the population as a whole. Mental Health Ireland (MHI) advocates the following five-step approach that anyone can follow to feel good and function well:

- connect – with the people around you;
- be active – take exercise;
- take notice – be aware of the world around you and what you are feeling;
- keep learning – do something new; and,
- give – volunteer or join a community group.

Further information can be gained at the MHI website: www.mentalhealthireland.ie.

Survey

A research group at Dublin City University

(DCU) has asked Teagasc to promote a survey on farmer mental health literacy and help seeking among farmers. More information is available on Twitter at @FarMHealthP. You can complete the survey at: bit.ly/3AKMKbI.



Learning and doing new things are important for wellbeing.

