Teagasc Advisory Newsletter

BEEF

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The cash challenge for 2022

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Normally at this time of year the main argument beef farmers are having is with beef processors on the price of finished cattle. For the first time in a long while farmers are achieving the type of prices that have been required for covering typical historical winter costs. The problem facing farmers now is that the 2022 input costs have spiralled to levels never envisaged, and with input prices continuing to rise, farmers need to take action now to ensure cash supply doesn't dry up mid year. Nitrogen (N) prices have now nearly trebled since last year and meal prices are rising by the month. A farm that spent in the region of €10,000 last year on fertiliser could spend around €25,000 or more this year, with almost €10,000 of that used up by the time the silage ground is closed up. Meal prices have risen to a lesser extent, but it remains to be seen where the price of meal finishes up at year end. If stock numbers remain the same as in previous years, then a similar quantity of inputs will be required at a much higher cost, so stating that you simply won't buy expensive fertiliser or meal doesn't stack up. Other costs such as contractors, polythene, milk replacer, etc., have increased or will increase also, so it is in farmers' best interest to plan ahead and analyse firstly where costs can be cut without hitting production targets and sales, and secondly, to ensure they have enough cash in the system, be it dry cash in accounts, or bank facilities such as overdrafts or credit lines.

Beef farming by its nature can have poor levels of cashflow, with some systems such as suckler to weanling having the majority of income coming in at the back end of the year; therefore, extra overdraft facilities may be only needed for five or six months until stock sales and direct payments start to arrive. The main message for farmers is not to let a situation to develop whereby bills are allowed to

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pile up at a much higher level than previous years. Allowing this to happen will lead to significant levels of stress for both farmers and creditors. So far despite beef prices increasing, it still isn't enough to cover the increased costs.

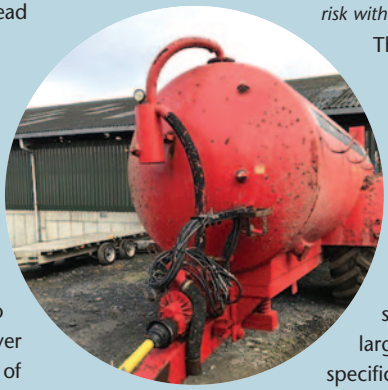
Farmers need to complete an income and expenditure budget for the year ahead. Teagasc offers a number of online tools to complete this, one being the Cost Control Planner. This will highlight where the gaps are in terms of income and where bank facilities may be needed to plug the gap. Most banks offer business credit line facilities at less than 4% interest currently, which is much cheaper than current overdraft rates. A chat with your bank now could be the most important call you make this year. Interest rate rises are being mooted by the European Central Bank (ECB), with small hikes forecast for year end. While not of concern at the moment, taking on major expenditure and investment on farm this year will need to be severely stress tested for rate rises, no matter what enterprise you are in. The most important move a farmer can make right now in light of cost inflation is to sit down and plan out spending for the year. This can be done with your family, Teagasc advisor, bank, accountant, or preferably a mix of all of these. There is hope for commodity prices to continue to increase and offset the costs, but farmers need to be ready for bumps in the road.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Tractor/machine overturning dangers

With slurry and fertiliser spread in March, there is a lot of high-injury-risk movement. Farm deaths have occurred due to overturning of tractors, loaders and trailed equipment, including slurry tankers and cattle trailers/boxes.

Tractors can overturn due to speed, slopes and driving over rough ground. The number of slurry tankers on farms has increased with low-emission slurry spreading (LESS), with many 2,500-3,000-gallon (c. 11-14k-litre) slurry tankers used on farms. These tankers can weigh over 16 tonnes when fully laden. Tankers overturning on slopes or into drains or rolling in farmyards has occurred.



There is an overturning risk with machines.

The highest risk of overturning is on hillsides or descending slopes. With tankers it is imperative to have a tractor with enough power/weight to control the tanker. A four-wheel drive tractor of about 110 horsepower (HP) on level ground (30HP higher on sloping ground) is required for a large tanker (consult manufacturer specifications). When in the farmyard, make sure the tractor and tanker are parked securely on stable ground to prevent crushing. To reduce musculoskeletal injury risk, empty and clean filling pipes before moving or lifting. Wear protective gloves (e.g., nitrile) when handling equipment and use washing facilities after slurry work.

Green Acres

The primary objective of the rearing period on calf-to-beef farms is transitioning a calf from a pre ruminant – an animal dependent on milk feeding – to a ruminant as early in life as possible, without decreasing animal performance.

Teagasc Green Acres participants are in the midst of calf rearing; the animal performance target during this stage is a daily liveweight gain of 0.7kg from arrival to weaning. To achieve this target, focus not only needs to be placed on sourcing a healthy calf from a trusted source, but also on ensuring the animal's environmental, nutritional and health needs are met.

In terms of environmental pressures, the shed in which the animal is housed should be fit for purpose, provide a dry bed, facilitate cleanliness, and be adequately ventilated to ensure pathogens and bugs can escape, while also allowing for the ingress of fresh air without causing draughts. Only a suitable milk replacer, formulated using milk-derived proteins, should be offered. Ideally this should be +20% for protein, 16-18% fat/oil, <0.15% fibre and <8% ash.

Additionally, concentrate feeds should be offered from an early age, as concentrate intake is the most important factor for rumen development.

The implementation of a vaccination programme for viral and bacterial pneumonia, infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), and clostridial diseases should also be considered

Source healthy calves from a trusted source.

to aid the protection of calf health.

The implementation of such a programme should be done in conjunction with your local Teagasc advisor and vet.

The final step in calf rearing is the weaning period. This can occur when calves are over eight weeks old, weigh >85kg and are consuming >1kg of concentrate for three consecutive days. The weanling process should also be completed gradually over a seven- to ten-day period, during which time calves should be monitored to ensure the transition from a milk-based diet to a solid feed diet is a success.

RESEARCH UPDATE

Breeding low methane-emitting cattle

PAUL SMITH, SINÉAD WATERS, DAVID KENNY and STUART KIRWAN of Teagasc Grange and Alan Kelly (UCD) report on the first large-scale measurement of methane emissions in Irish beef cattle.

Digestion of consumed feed is one of the largest contributors to the quantity of methane emitted by ruminant livestock. Indeed, in the recently completed FACCE ERA-GAS-funded RumenPredict collaborative research project led by Teagasc and involving UCD and the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (ICBF), it was established that for a typical indoor finishing ration, beef cattle produce, on average, 22g of methane for every kg of feed dry matter consumed (i.e., DMI). In order to better assess animals on their methane emissions, growth performance and emissions were accurately measured on 282 beef cattle at the ICBF Progeny Test Centre (Tully, Co. Kildare). In addition, detailed information on feed intake and bodyweight was measured over a 90-day period. The residual methane emissions (RME) index was then used to determine the difference between the methane emissions predicted for an animal based on its body size and feed intake, and that which it actually produces, with lower values being desired. This concept has been identified as the optimal approach to assess the methane-emitting potential of individual animals, while taking into consideration their feed intake (cost) and carcass growth (value), and allows us to disentangle the

Measuring methane output in cattle.

relationship between feed intake and methane output. At the end of the test period, cattle were ranked as high, medium or low in terms of RME. Low-RME animals (efficient) produced, on average, 30% less methane, despite having the same level of feed intake, feed efficiency, growth and carcass output as their high (inefficient) ranking RME contemporaries. Results from this study, which were recently published in the American Journal of Animal Science, highlight the potential to breed more environmentally sustainable animals, while at the same time not having a negative impact on the animals' performance, and indeed profitability. Further work is ongoing to study the underlying biology of the trait and potentially incorporate it into the national breeding indices for Irish beef cattle.

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