Teagasc
Advisory
Newsletter

DAIRY

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Sexed semen on the rise in 2022

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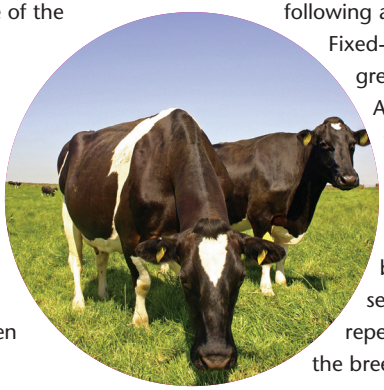
The opportunity to use sexed semen has never been better than during the 2022 breeding season. With the opening of the Sexing Technologies laboratory at Moorepark last autumn, the range and quality of bulls available this year has improved enormously. The benefit of sexed semen is obvious: practically all dairy breed heifer calves, without the hassle and hardship of arranging the sale of the less valuable dairy breed bull calves.

Reduced conception rates to sexed semen compared with conventional semen remains a big worry on farmers' minds. Research shows that the difference in conception rate can be reduced by carefully targeting sexed semen usage on the following cows:



- younger cows in lactations one to four;
- those calved more than 50 days at the start of the breeding season; and,
- those in good body condition score (BCS), cycling regularly and free of postpartum diseases and disorders.

Many farmers are considering using sexed semen this year on replacement heifers following a synchronisation programme. Fixed-time AI programmes provide great control over the timing of AI, and remove the requirement to heat detect before first AI. Because heifers can be synchronised to be bred together on the first day of the breeding season, there will be a second opportunity to breed the repeats between days 17 and 24 of the breeding season.

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Use a HerdPlus Sire Advice plan

Sire Advice from the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (ICBF) is an excellent tool to help you maximise the genetic gain of your herd. You can pick a panel of AI bulls, and the programme will match the right bull to the right cow based on the genetics of both. This helps you to:

1. Maximise economic breeding index (EBI) across the herd.
2. Reduce the risk of inbreeding.
3. Deliver a more balanced herd.

Sire Advice also allows you to mark cows to be culled and to identify the lower-merit cows to be bred to high-Dairy Beef Index (DBI) beef bulls. This information will be relayed to your AI technician's handheld device so that the plan can be easily followed during the breeding season.

Selecting the poorer-performing cows for beef mating can deliver between 5% and 15% of an increase in the EBI gain of next year's heifer calf crop being bred, thus improving the progeny further.

Combining good bull choices with intensive cow selection and selective use of sexed semen, has the potential to deliver significantly more profitable and more environmentally friendly cows into the future. Don't leave it to others to make the most important decision for the year – talk to your Teagasc advisor about completing a Sire Advice plan for your herd in 2022.

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.

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).

There is an overturning risk with machines.

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.

Keep grass on track

The objective in March is to increase the proportion of the farm grazed, but not to get too far ahead of target. Grass supply has been very good on farms this spring with the average farm cover (AFC) about 900kg DM/ha on March 1 (PastureBase Ireland figures). Where slurry and nitrogen (N) fertiliser applications have taken place, the response in grass growth has been good. The aim must be to keep grass in the diet of dairy cows as much as possible during March.

Keep looking back...

Every dairy farmer will need to examine the farm for grass supply during March. It is important to keep an eye on the recovery of the first paddocks grazed. During March it is important to walk the farm to ensure that there is enough grass available in April to start the second rotation. There needs to be four to five paddocks with a good level of grass recovery to gain a knowledge as to when the second rotation can begin in April. The proportion of the farm grazed in February and level of grass recovery on these paddocks will determine when the second rotation will begin.

Knowing your farm cover makes grazing and feed management much easier. Remember, the AFC should not drop below 550kg DM/ha at any time, otherwise grass growth will be compromised. Check out the PastureBase Ireland website and app for tips and advice on estimating your farm cover, or ask your advisor for help.

Check that you are on target to have 66% of the farm grazed by 17 March for drier farms (10-14 days later on heavier farms)

Book a milk recording for your farm

Turning out your maiden heifers 6-8 weeks pre breeding will help them reach their target breeding weight

Using slurry this spring on silage ground can contribute a significant proportion of your P&K requirements

Don't forget 1,2,3 for colostrum management

For tillage crops, apply 1st N split when soil, crop & weather conditions are suitable

CellCheck tips of the month

Milk quality for the whole lactation depends on the success of somatic cell count (SCC) control in early lactation, as this is the highest-risk period for mastitis infection to occur. Get on top of SCC early by identifying problem animals and putting good controls in place, such as:

- get your first recording done in March if not already done – clip tails and freeze brands a day or two beforehand to make the job cleaner and cows easier to identify;
- take action when the results come back – identify the high-SCC cows and quarter sample/California Mastitis Test (CMT) and treat on your vet's advice – stop the spread by milking high-SCC cows last or dipping/flushing clusters after milking them;
- be alert to the number of cases of mastitis occurring – if greater than 5% of your cows and 15% of heifers have had mastitis in the first month of calving you should investigate;
- it is good practice to check all cows with a CMT before milking them into the bulk tank – this will help you find any cows with subclinical mastitis;
- don't forget to disinfect gloves after stripping a cow with mastitis, as the bacteria can be spread to the next cow you strip;
- recording all clinical cases is essential to monitor mastitis levels in your herd – a clear, easily seen record on a blackboard or whiteboard should be made during milking and transferred at a later date to a more permanent record;
- some farms use a group chat function on their mobiles for anyone doing milking to record cases and to keep things in one place – keep the chat to treatments only; and,
- do not neglect hygiene for later-calving cows. Calve in a clean dry environment with adequate space – if your knees are wet after kneeling, it is not dry enough for calving cows!

Profit monitor – costs rising

Recently Teagasc advisors helped over 1,200 dairy farmers to complete a profit monitor for their 2021 figures. This is a very important management practice because it allows farmers to gauge costs and performance against a group of high-performing peers. There have been many excellent improvements made to the eProfit Monitor system recently around labour costs and flexible reporting. As for the reported costs on dairy farms, it will come as no surprise that the trend in costs per cow was sharply upward in 2021. There was a large range between farms; however, total variable costs were close to €1,000 per cow on average, with fixed costs such as labour, fuel, depreciation and interest to come out before net profit. Total costs are projected to increase further in 2022. We encourage everyone to make good use of the reports for decision-making throughout the year. For example, are all cows in the herd 'paying their way' in 2022? Your profit monitor data will help answer these types of question.

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