

DAIRY

February 2023

Edited by
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Top 5 tips for February

- 1) Get calves off to the best start – start testing colostrum quality on your farm using a Brix refractometer (>22 = quality colostrum). Follow the 1-2-3 rule – every calf should get three litres of colostrum within the first two hours of life from the first milking.
- 2) Get your grass year into gear – get cows out to grass for at least three hours per day. Remember slurry is a valuable nutrient source. Apply the correct rate on the correct areas using low-emission slurry spreading (LESS) systems.
- 3) Get on top of somatic cell count (SCC) issues early – doing a California mastitis test (CMT) on freshly calved cows will identify sub-clinical cows. They can be milked separately (to avoid cross contamination to other cows). Their milk can be excluded from the bulk tank, and their infected quarters should be monitored and treated if necessary. Book your first milk recording; it should be within the first 60 days after the start of calving.



Get cows out to grass at least three hours a day.

- 4) Control milk fever – ensure a high-quality dry cow mineral continues to be fed at the recommended rate. March/April calvers often cause issues with clinical and sub-clinical milk fever, so manage body condition score (BCS) of these cows to avoid over-conditioned cows.
- 5) Evening milking time – start as you mean to go on! If you aren't already doing so, try to start the evening milking between 3.00pm and 4.00pm. There is no reduction in milk by reducing milking interval to 16:8 hours.

Early turnout to grass

The value of extra grass in the cow's diet in spring is very high, as it replaces other more expensive feeds and supports high solids milk. Cows should be turned out to grass as early as possible in February. The aim is to graze about 25-30% of the farm during this month (hit this target about a week later on heavier ground). Grazing the paddocks with the lower cover of grass gets the farm off to a good start. Paddocks with covers of grass of about 700-1,000kg DM/ha are suitable.

Wet days arrive every spring, so a plan must be put in place to deal with these days. The driest paddocks with multiple access points and lowest covers of grass need to be used on these days to ensure access of cows to grass. Flexibility in grazing is required on these days, with cows having access to grass for two to three hours and an appetite to graze. Avoid poaching but don't be too cautious either. Check our Grass10 newsletter for weekly updates and information.

Once-a-day milking to reduce workload

With the calving season underway for spring-calving herds, an increase in workload is inevitable. However, there are practices that can help reduce workload. One of these practices is once-a-day (OAD) milking in early lactation. **Table 1** shows the milk yield results for cows on four weeks of OAD milking compared to cows on twice-a-day (TAD) milking.

Initially, there was a 20% reduction in yield but when cows switched back to TAD yields recovered quickly. By week 35 of lactation there was only a 2% difference in yield between cows that got four weeks of OAD and those that were milked TAD for the full year. At farm level there should be no

difference in yield due to four weeks of OAD milking in spring because not all cows will be on OAD for the full four weeks.

An increase in SCC is a reason as to why some farmers decide not to go OAD in early lactation. For herds to be suitable for OAD it is recommended that SCC is below 200. SCC does increase initially when milking OAD for four weeks, but this reduces and over the whole year, there was no difference between the TAD and OAD groups.

With over 50% of cows calved by the end of February, OAD milking for February alone can greatly reduce labour. Also, it will free up the day so that you can solely focus on cow and calf care.

Table 1: OAD milk yield versus TAD.

	OAD	TAD
Daily four-week milk yield (kg/cow/day)	17.4	22.1
Daily four-week milk solids yield (kg/cow)	1.57	1.96

Early nitrogen

The application of early spring nitrogen (N) (fertiliser or slurry) is important to boost grass growth. However, grass growth response to N in early spring is lower than what we get during the summer, so it's vital that we manage this properly to get the best possible grass growth response.

The target for N application on intensive dairy farms with dry land is to have about 60 units N/acre applied by early April. This is generally broken down into 23 units N/acre in late January/early February followed by more N in March. A total of 20-23 units N/acre is more

than enough for the levels of grass grown from mid January to March 1. Applying slurry at about 2,000-2,500 gallons/acre by LESS will meet this target.

To get the best response to N in spring, soil temperatures need to be 5°C and rising (at 10cm depth). The Teagasc Grass10 newsletter publishes a predicted grass growth rate every Tuesday. The best fertiliser N type for early spring is protected urea, as it is less prone to losses to water than CAN or compounds. Slurry at this time is also a great source of N, phosphorus (P) and potassium (K).

Planning for investments in 2023

Patrick Gowing, Teagasc

While many farmers had a profitable year in 2022, they may still require finance from the bank to assist them if they are undertaking any large capital projects in 2023. The advice is to start planning well in advance. Here are some useful tips that may help you:

- have your accounts up to date – the bank will use your previous tax accounts to see your level of performance, current debt levels, tax position and drawings off farm;
- borrow over the right term – don't put your farm under cash stress by trying to pay off your loans too fast;
- have a good capital budget completed, with at least a 15-20% contingency – it is better to

secure funding upfront rather than running out of cash halfway through the project;

- a bank will normally lend to about 70% of the total investment – the farmer has to have some equity input in the overall proposal; and,
 - security: there are some short-term loan options in all banks or credit unions that can be drawn down without any security – for the larger longer-term investments you will need to draw down a secured loan; it can take a long time to get all the legal paperwork in place, so if you require a loan that involves security start the process well in advance of when you require the funding; and,
 - prepare a business plan – it puts figures on your proposed investment and shows the impact it will have on your business going forward.
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HEALTH & SAFETY

Stick to your goals



Plan safe facilities and escape route with cows.

New year's resolutions can work. We have waited until the February newsletter to make this point. New year's resolutions have got a bad name and by now many may have fallen by the wayside. However, the stages of change framework applies and to make important changes to your farming practices and lifestyle, its learning points need to be understood. The stages of change are: pre contemplation – unawareness, unmotivated; contemplation – increased awareness of the pros and cons; preparation – planning action; action – start implementing; maintenance – after implementing you notice the benefits. People go back and forth between stages but the important point is to stick to your goals until maintenance is achieved. During March, workload



Park vehicles safely, with the handbrake on.

is the main health and safety issue on farms. This can lead to rushing and shortcuts. Identify some changes that could make your life safer, healthier and easier and then follow through with implementation. Farmers are mainly self-managers, so it's up to you to make changes.