Teagasc Advisory Newsletter

DAIRY

October 2023

Top five tips for October

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- Arrange a milk recording for your herd at the latest 45 days out from drying out to help identify cows that may have somatic cell count (SCC) issues, and more importantly, to select cows that are suitable for sealer only. The selection of the appropriate cows as well as excellent hygiene standards at drying off are essential for a selective dry cow therapy.
- Body condition score (BCS) your herd. Identify cows that may be under condition and would benefit from a longer dry period. Weather conditions have been tough on cows in the last few weeks so body condition of the herd may not be where it was in other years.
- Plan your autumn closing grazing. Close enough ground early enough to have grass available in the spring. It is very important to have an adequate supply of grass to fresh calved cows in light of potentially a low milk price and poorer quality silage in yards.
- Use the quieter time of the year to start washing out and disinfecting calf and calving sheds for the new year. While it may seem like a good while away from calving, take advantage of the quieter time of the year to have the farm setup for spring.
- Check your dairy wash storage requirements for the coming winter with your advisor. You will require 31 days of dairy washings storage as the closed period for this will be for all of December. Knowing your storage and potential outcomes of you dairy washings and slurry storage will allow you to plan properly for this winter.

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October grazing

There are two objectives in autumn grazing management of dairy cows. Firstly, the cows must be adequately fed using the cheapest available feed, which is grazed grass. Given the price of meal and silage, every day at grass is worth well over €2/cow/day additional profit. The second objective is set the farm up for spring grass. The most important task any dairy farmer will undertake over the next two months is to ensure that the farm is closed off properly so that an adequate supply of grass is available early next year. The last rotation needs to be planned to have grass early in spring. The last rotation should begin in early October (from 5-10) for most farms. This date will vary a small bit according to grass growth, soil type and to a lesser extent stocking rate. For farms with a difficult soil type closing up should begin in the last days of September. To get good clean outs of paddocks, a strip wire will be necessary.

Date when 60% is closed

This is a very critical date. For most farms this is early November. This is because most of the grass available in early spring will be grown in October/early November. Very little growth occurs over the winter months so most of the grass available in spring is carried over from the previous autumn/early winter. The target is to have about 60% of the farm closed up by November 1. Where higher stocking rates/very compact calving exist on the milking platform, the amount of the farm to be closed will be over 75%.

The last rotation should begin in early October for most.

Encourage clover – close late!

The road ahead for many dairy farms will include a reduction in nitrogen (N) fertiliser input. Clover in the sward will become a source of N to replace chemical N. Many farms will have carried out reseeding during the year. Some paddocks on farms will have some clover in the sward, especially those who reseeded in the last two or three seasons. This clover needs to develop well to supply N during the summer months going forward on the farm. The rule is simple: this time of year encourage clover into a greater presence in the sward for future N generation. The clover plant needs light across the winter months and light in the spring to enable it to make a successful contribution to the sward the following spring and especially in the summer months; therefore, the swards with the best clover potential must be closed later rather than earlier. The ideal time to close these paddocks is late October/early November.

Impact of changes to Nitrates Derogation

The EU Commission decision to reduce the upper limit on organic N from 250kg N per ha to 220kg N per ha for Nitrates Derogation farms in designated catchment areas will have significant consequences for many dairy farms in 2024 and beyond. The Teagasc Nitrogen Report 2023 (see link below) indicates a reduction in margin of up to €400 per ha, based on modelling the required change in stocking rate on a high-performing dairy farm. **Table 1** outlines the effect of the upper limit for organic N and herd banding category in tandem for illustration.

Table 1: Maximum herd size for a combination of organic N limits per ha and herd banding categories.

Nitrates band	Land area	Maximum herd size (cows only)	
		250kg N/ha	220kg N/ha
<4,500kg (80kg N)	50ha	156	137
4,501-6,500kg (92kg N)	50ha	135	119
>6,501kg (106kg N)	50ha	117	103

Evidently, the physical and financial consequences of these changes will vary depending on individual farm circumstances. For farms that are currently stocked below 220kg N per ha, the short-term impacts may be relatively minor. Nonetheless, future growth opportunities may be curtailed. For farms exceeding 220kg N per ha, decisions will need to be made to maintain compliance status. Some of the possible approaches include:

- leasing additional land to reduce organic N stocking rate;
- reducing cow numbers where stocking rate is beyond the economic optimum for the farm;
- discontinuing a beef enterprise;
- contract rearing of young stock;
- reducing herd average annual milk yield to limit organic N excretion rate per cow; and,
- exporting slurry.

There are pros and cons to these options and it is difficult to give generic advice due to the range in farm circumstances. We therefore encourage all clients likely to be affected to contact their advisor to discuss the best response for their farm, including the costs and practical outworkings of each.

Finally, nutrient management on individual farms (i.e., slurry storage and handling, fertiliser application rate and timing, watercourse management) has a very significant role to play in maintaining and improving water quality at a catchment level, so ensure best practice is adhered to. The Teagasc Nitrogen Report 2023 is available here:
https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2023/The-Impact-of-Nitrogen-Management-Strategies-within-Grass-Based-Dairy-Systems.pdf.

SCC and selective dry cow therapy

Here are some key points on SCC and selective dry cow therapy:

- a recent on-farm study by Clabby *et al.* examining 21 commercial dairy herds identified the bacterium *Staph Aureus* as the predominant cause of mastitis in Irish dairy herds;
- first calvers had higher levels of infection than cows in their second or greater lactation – early lactation infection was responsible for elevated SCC in first calvers – although low levels of clinical mastitis cases indicate reasonable levels of udder health within the herd, the risk of *Staph Aureus* infection between herd-mates is very real;
- greater attention needs to be given to managing the udder health of all cows throughout the lactation to minimise the risk of spread;
- the best single predictor for choice of dry cow therapy was the last milk recording SCC – a cut-off of 65,000 was identified as being the SCC that maximised the number of cows on sealer-only treatment, while still identifying the cows that had infection for treatment with antibiotics;
- another significant factor contributing to the success of the sealer-only treatment was the level of milk production on the day of drying, with yields of <15kg giving the best SCC in the subsequent lactation;
- excellent cubicle hygiene (twice-daily liming) was also significant in reducing infection in the subsequent lactation; and,
- a free dry consult with your vet is available through Animal Health Ireland. More information is available at: https://animalhealthireland.ie/programmes/cellcheck/cellcheck-cell-count-solutions-tasah/.

The bacterium Staph Aureus *is the predominant cause of mastitis in Irish dairy herds.*

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