



DAIRY

August 2023

Top five tips for August

Edited by

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1) *Last chance to correct grass quality before building farm cover*

Building grass covers off a clean base has to be the key target in the second half of August. The correction of grass quality on farms therefore must take place in the first two to three weeks of August. Target pre-grazing yields of 1,300-1,400kg DM/ha during this period and remove surpluses as they arise at the first available opportunity.

2) *Don't let somatic cell count creep in the second half of lactation*

Use milk recording to make informed decisions around managing somatic cell count (SCC). Culling a few chronically infected cows now might be a tough decision for many, but the headaches that high SCC cause are not worth it; people need to stop the spread now by whatever means works best on their farm.

3) *Weigh replacement heifer calves now*

Establish their weights relative to targets for

August 1; calves should be 175kg now for a target 550kg mature cow weight (maintenance €20). Change management treatment for all animals below target weight – either introduce meals or graze in front of older calves or heifers.

4) *Get lime spread before it's too late*

One of those jobs that is historically left until late autumn and often never happens as a result to poor ground conditions or heavy grass covers is the spreading of ground limestone to correct soil pH. Now is the ideal time after silage cuts have taken place to analyse soil results and get lime spread where required.

5) *Ensure you take some time off*

The breeding season has finished up on farms over the last few weeks, which ticks off one of the remaining key tasks within the calendar year. This should allow the opportunity if you haven't already done so to schedule some time away from the farm over the coming weeks and months.

Building grass in August

August is the month to start building grass for the autumn. The growth of grass during the next six weeks is crucial as the rate of grass growth (supply) will be less than what is eaten (demand) by mid September. On many farms, silage area comes back into grazing in August and thereby lengthens the rotation. Not all dairy farms have silage area available to graze on the platform. This makes it more difficult to build grass supply. Removing other stock from the platform (heifers, calves, cull cows, etc.) will lower the stocking

rate, thereby reducing feed demand. Many farmers will feed bale silage (made from surplus grass) to reduce feed demand. This also helps to build grass supply. In reality, it takes a combination of different actions to increase grass supply during August. Whatever the choice, it is better that additional feed goes into the herd during August to allow grass supply pick up rapidly rather than later on when grass growth is much slower. Outlined in **Table 1** are the grazing targets for dairy farms for August.

Table 1: Autumn grazing targets.

Date	Cover/cow (kg DM)	Average farm cover (kg DM/ha)	Rotation length
Stocking rate of 2.5 LU/ha			
August 1	180	450	20 days
Mid August	200	500	25 days
September 1	300	750	30 days
Stocking rate of 3.0 LU/ha			
August 1	180	550	20 days
Mid August	250	750	25 days
September 1	330	990	30 days
Stocking rate of 3.5 LU/ha			
August 1	190	665	20 days
Mid August	220	770	25 days
September 1	280	980	30 days

Costs on dairy farms in 2023

As we move through the year we can now make a good estimate to establish where the likely costs of production will be compared to 2022. We all know that we had a record year for profits in 2022 but we also recorded a record high in the cost of the production milk of over €2,000 per cow.

If we look at the fixed costs in 2023 we will see that the majority of costs have stayed high and some, like ESB, interest, labour and land charges, have all increased compared to 2022. The rate of increase will vary depending on your farm structure and debt, but in general there will be no decline in fixed costs and on some farms these will increase.

If we look at the variable costs outside of feed, fertiliser and contractor fees, first we will see a similar trend to the fixed costs where there has been no reduction in unit price of inputs and services into your farm.

Contracting in general will be similar to 2022, so the big changes in costs are in feed and fertiliser.

Feed increased in cost in the early spring and has since fallen, but will average close to the 2022 unit cost. Fertiliser has fallen dramatically from the high prices in the spring. The potential savings will depend on when you purchased and used your fertiliser.

Some farms bought early and may see no significant difference.

When we combine all the potential changes with some savings in feed and fertiliser, and assuming similar rates of usage and increases in fixed costs, the likely cost of production for 2022 will be on par with 2023. This means 2023 will be a high cost year. The drop in milk price will determine the overall drop in profitability between 2022 and 2023.

However as we are still only halfway through the year, you still have time to control your costs by focusing on grass and maximising your milk return from it. Do a fodder budget. If you have a potential shortage, moving non-performing stock early is a better alternative to purchasing fodder in a high cost year.

Farmyard development – plan carefully

This time of year is often where plans are put into place for farmyard development. The upcoming winter and following spring are coming back into mind. Whether it is a new cubicle shed, parlour, calf housing, extra slurry storage or silage pits, they all require time to get the physical and financial planning right.

Cost, location, size and cow/machinery traffic flow are the main criteria that need to be taken into

account. Of the four items, which one is most important? Which should be discussed first?

Cost is often the main driver of design and location of development work. This is very understandable, particularly now with building cost increases.

However, if you focus too much on cost from the outset to the detriment of good design, you may end up not having made best use of your hard-earned capital.

In many yards if there is an existing building that can be in some way used to cut initial costs, this is where most people will want to start the new building or extension. Is this always the right place to start? Compromising on cow flow or ease of managing stock is never the right thing to do, even if you have to spend more on a different location. Similarly, machinery access for feeding and cleaning, preferably without crossing animal areas, is critically important for an efficient work layout. This should not be compromised for modest short-term savings.

Of course, the scope for having an ideal design is limited by repayment capacity; a business plan is required to calculate this. A business plan takes into account your current average income, cost of production, drawings and when your current loans are reducing.

This gives a clear indication on timing of borrowing, potential improvements to increase income and reduce costs. All farm development plans should start with a business plan. Speak to your Teagasc advisor about business and farm development planning.

HEALTH & SAFETY



Funding for PTO covers and ATV helmets

Funding is now available under the new National Farm Safety Measure to cover 60% of the eligible cost of up to two quad bike (ATV) helmets and four power take off (PTO) shaft covers. A total of €1.5m has been allocated by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) to support farmers in the purchase of this equipment. The grant aid is subject to a maximum eligible cost of €100 per PTO shaft cover and €150 per quad bike helmet. Only ATV/quad helmets and PTO covers that meet the scheme specifications are eligible. Check carefully before purchase. Applications can be made until September 29 using your [agfood.ie](https://www.agfood.ie) online account. To learn more contact your local Teagasc office.

August is part of the summer school holiday period. Ensure children are supervised while on the farm. Autumn-calving herds can be very busy during August. Always take time to identify the temperament of the cow/heifer before assisting. Calving gates help by providing a physical barrier to protect you. Take time to use them. Farm vehicles and machinery are very busy during August. Always ensure moving parts on machines are guarded and vehicles are driven safely. Scan the QR code with your smartphone to see a video on harvest safety.

