Teagasc Advisory Newsletter

DAIRY

February 2024

Top five tips for February

EDITED BY
JOE PATTON,
HEAD OF DAIRY
KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

For grazing, feed the cow correctly, limit poaching, and hit the desired residual.

1. Remember the one, two, three colostrum rule – use colostrum from the first milking for the first feed; give it within two hours of birth; and, ensure the calf gets at least three litres. You can also measure colostrum with a Brix refractometer – 22% or more indicates good quality.
2. Get a good start to spring grazing – aim to feed the cow correctly, limit poaching, and hit the desired residual, in that order.
3. Keep good calving records – they are essential for your breeding plan. Record difficult calvings, retained

IN SPRING 2024, A DAY'S EXTRA GRAZING WILL BE WORTH OVER

€3

per cow per day due to high feed costs indoors.

Teagasc
Agriculture and Food Development Authority

afterbirths, milk fever cases, etc. This will help in deciding your pre-breeding programme, and cow selection for dairy sexed semen.

4. Buy yourself time this spring – using a contractor as additional labour is something to consider. What machinery work can you outsource? Spreading slurry and chemical fertiliser coincide with your busiest periods, so outsourcing these will free up valuable time.
5. Book your milk recording – managing annual somatic cell count (SCC) relies on a successful dry and early lactation period. Milk recording plays a huge role and should take place no more than 60 days after the first cow calves.

Dairy costs and margins 2023

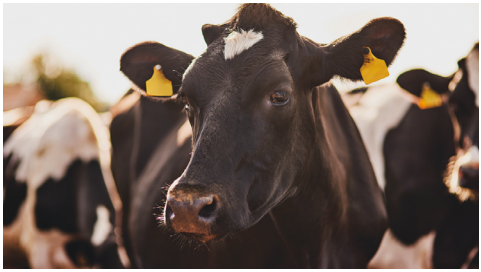
Teagasc dairy advisory staff met discussion groups in January to examine 2023 costs and margins, and plan 2024. Here are some trends relative to 2022:

- milk solids per cow and per ha declined by 5% (501kg to 478kg and 1,453kg to 1,385kg, respectively);
- peak cow numbers increased by 2%;
- total value of milk sales declined by 29%;
- purchased concentrate declined by 8% or 0.65 cent per litre;
- purchased forage increased by 14% or 0.12 cent per litre;
- fertiliser costs declined by 22%;
- total variable costs were relatively static, declining by 3%;
- total fixed costs increased by 10%; and,
- the net outcome of these changes was a 66% reduction in dairy farm margin (including own labour charges but excluding tax and capital costs).

Much to consider

These trends are based on a matched sample of eProfit Monitor clients. They do not represent the national average. Nonetheless, they give a good picture of the sharply declining profit trend that virtually every dairy farmer experienced in 2023. Feedback at meetings has understandably been that the figures are sobering and require much thought. The trends in fixed costs and purchased forage need to be monitored closely.

What decisions will you make this year based on last year's numbers? The analysis should not end after the annual discussion group meeting. Make costs a priority topic for your group in 2024. Your Teagasc advisor is available to discuss.



Peak cow numbers increased by 2% in 2023.

Reduce milking workload

Once-a-day (OAD) milking in early lactation can help reduce workload during spring calving. Moorepark research shows that initially there is a 20% reduction in yield, but when cows switch back to twice a day (TAD), yields recover quickly. By week 35 of lactation there is 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 three to four weeks of OAD in spring, as not all cows will be on OAD for four weeks, unlike in the experiment.

Once-a-day milking in February can reduce workload significantly.

Labour survey

Labour survey data shows a low uptake of OAD milking in February. Increased SCC is a genuine reason for not practising OAD. The practice is not recommended for herds that have an annual SCC of higher than 200,000 cells/ml. Look at your milk recording results for last year and see if this practice worth trying this February.

Of the main reasons given in **Table 1** for not practising OAD milking in February, habit was not included. Some farms that practise OAD for February milk in the morning and others milk in the middle of the day. The important thing is consistency.

Table 1: Dairy discussion group members with 120-cow herd size on why they do or do not practise OAD milking in February.

Reasons for not practising OAD in February	Reason for practising OAD in February
1. SCC will increase.	1. SCC below 200,000 cells/ml annually.
2. Not that busy in February.	2. Takes pressure off in evening.
3. Takes longer to milk in morning.	3. Frees evening for cow/calf care.
4. Milking freshly calved cow/s anyway.	4. Easy to milk one/two cows.
5. Feed all whole milk to calves.	5. Milk replacer or have separate storage for whole milk in the evening.

Fertiliser and grazing guidelines

Grazing notes

Table 2 shows fertiliser guidelines for the coming period. Cows should be turned out to grass as early as possible in February. The aim is to graze 25-30% of the farm during this month. Target paddocks with the lowest covers of grass. Paddocks with covers of about 700-1,000kg DM/ha are suitable.

Most silage ground should be targeted for grazing in early March. Wet days arrive every spring, so a plan has to be put in place to deal with these. The driest paddocks with multiple access points and lowest covers of grass need to be grazed on these days to ensure access of cows to grass for at least two to three hours.

Table 2: Fertiliser guidelines for spring.

Fertiliser /slurry split	Product	First 40% of farm area	15% of farm area	15% of farm area	Final 30% of farm area
January /February[1]	Cattle slurry[2]	2,000 gallons /ac (16 units N/ac – 20kg N /ha). Lower covers (<1,000kg DM /ha)			
February[1]	Protected urea (NBPT)			23 units N/ac (29kg N/ha)	23 units N/ac (29kg N/ha)
	Cattle slurry[2]		2,500 gallons /ac (20 units N/ac – 25kg N/ha) Mid February after grazing	2,500 gallons /ac (20 units N/ac – 25kg N/ha). End of February after grazing	
March	Protected urea (NBPT)	40 units N/ac (50kg N/ha)	40 units N/ac (50kg N/ha)	23 units N/ac (29kg N/ha)	40 units N/ac (50kg N/ha)
Total N by April 1	Slurry plus fertiliser N units/ac (kg /ha)	56 units N/ac (70kg N/ha)	60 units N/ac (75kg N/ha)	66 units N/ac (83kg N/ha)	63 units N/ac (79kg N/ha) Total 60 units N/ac (75kg N/ha)

1. Check soil temperature (6°C+) and ground conditions are suitable for slurry application. 2. Apply all slurry via LESS.

Teagasc
Agriculture and Food Development Authority

For further information on any issues raised in this newsletter, or to access other enterprise newsletters, please contact your local Teagasc advisor or see www.teagasc.ie.

Printed using vegetable-based inks and FSC-certified paper.

Design by Think Media