

DAIRY

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Top five tips for January

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Get everything ready for calving well in advance.

1. Prepare for calving – ensure all calving and calf-rearing facilities and equipment are ready, with ample supplies of consumables such as calf tags, gloves, iodine, and lubricant available. Store everything in a specific storage location so items can be quickly found.
2. Are you feeding the correct rate of pre-calving minerals? Check the bag for the correct feed rate and ensure this is being fed. At a 125g/cow/day feeding rate a 25kg bag will be used every two days per 100 cows.

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3. Review soil analysis and plan slurry applications to make best use of these valuable nutrients. At current fertiliser prices 1,000 gallons of slurry are worth €35. Target slurry to areas of the farm with low phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) levels.
4. Are you vaccinating for calf scour this year? Ensure vaccine is administered at an appropriate time pre calving.

Where there is a long calving season it may be necessary to stagger the vaccination of early and late-calving cows to ensure optimal timing.

5. Review silage stocks and grass supply. Source additional feed if a deficit is likely. What appears to be a small deficit now could become a big problem later this spring if weather and grazing conditions are poor.

Good reputations attract good workers

Employers in all sectors are looking for good staff. Small businesses often say that word of mouth is the best way to find suitable people. Therefore, having a good reputation as a farmer and employer is extremely important to be able compete with other employers. **Table 1** shows cause and effect factors that may contribute to negative perceptions. These points are not unique to dairy farming. They can be difficult to acknowledge and discuss for an individual, but nonetheless they might apply to

everyone at certain times. Recognising and fixing the causes before the effects become damaging is the objective.

Relax before the busy period

Spring can be a testing time for dairy farmers. When over-worked and sleep deprived, good people management can slip. Harm can be done to farmers' health, herd performance and reputation. Before spring calving, avail of the opportunity in January to relax and organise the farm for

Table 1: Cause and effect factors of negative perceptions.

Cause	Effect
Over-work and disorganisation	Long and unstructured hours Lack of work-life balance
Poor farm performance	Don't pay on time, poor facilities Sub-par animal health and welfare
No long-term plan	Health and safety issues Loss of staff confidence
Unrealistic expectations	Short tempered with staff Lack of respect for others

calving. Make every task on the farm as easy as possible.

Hire early

For new workers, ask them and pay them to come in before work gets busy. This will allow you to assess their capabilities and give them the chance to get to know you and your farm. This will allow for a smoother working relationship when the

cows start to calve. Finally, do not expect too much from work experience students. Their objective is to learn how a dairy farm operates. They will not learn if they only lime cubicles and feed calves. They need to shadow the farmer/farm manager in order to get a feel for the whole farm operation. Take a longer-term view on the value of students and provide a positive experience for them.

Get set up for a trouble-free calving

For most herds peak calving season is just around the corner. That brings great advantages later in the season but means a big labour challenge at peak time. Based on the experiences of some top-performing farms with compact calving and low calf mortality rates, here are some useful tips.

- Take an hour or two in January to make a plan for spring with all people working on the farm. Discuss what went well or badly last year, what can be done to fix any issues, and the priority tasks for each person. Discuss and decide a plan for rostering and cover for night calving, and spring evening and weekend work.
- Divide and group cows by calving date if able to. This will make sorting and drafting much simpler when calving commences.
- Ensure cows get enough minerals, eat low K forage, and are at body condition score (BCS) 3.0-3.35 at calving. Restrict feed to late-calving cows that are at risk of over-



Train heifers to parlour weeks before calving.

- conditioning. These steps will help reduce milk fever and other metabolic disorders.
- Train heifers to enter the parlour now. Mixing a few quieter older cows with the group for a few days before can help.
- Clip tails and freeze brands in time before calving to aid identification and hygiene.
- Plan to run a colostrum group during calving season. Cows will remain in this recovery group after calving until they are ready for the bulk tank. Set up an

accommodation area for this group. Milk the colostrum group last to simplify milking. Have a California Mastitis Test (CMT) kit in place and quarter test all cows before they begin milking to the bulk tank.

- Do your sums on calf accommodation space. A compact calving herd (75% plus in six weeks) will likely have 85-90% of total calves on hand at a given time in March. This means that calf housing of 1.5m² per cow in the herd is needed, e.g., a 100-cow herd needs 150m² space minimum. The figure will be closer to 180m² per 100 cows if calves are sold at an older age. Plan for extra temporary

space if short, and do not overcrowd calf sheds.

- Walk paddocks in mid to late January to assess opening farm grass cover. Set out a simple rotation plan for the first 30% of the farm to be grazed. Repair any problems with fencing, access gaps and drinkers for February.
- Have a system in place to easily move milk around the yard, e.g., milk cart trailer. Have all consumables in place and ready to use. Buy a refractometer for colostrum testing.
- Book a contractor for slurry and early fertiliser, and observe the correct dates for application for your zone.



Make 2024 safe and healthy

Sadly, 13 fatal farm workplace accidents occurred in 2023. Teagasc research shows that workload, rushing and tiredness are major factors, so good planning and preparation are key to reduce risk.

Keep facilities and machines well maintained, allow sufficient time to get each job done safely and seek help during busy periods.

Take care of your own health

Update your farm's risk assessment document now. It will help you to identify and remedy hazards and risks. Also think about your health. January is a great time to get a health check done and to take on health-enhancing measures, e.g., diet, exercise, and/or a hobby.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

