Teagasc Advisory Newsletter

DAIRY

March 2024

Top five tips for March

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Get fertiliser out to drive grass growth as you head towards the second rotation.

1. Early milk recording – assess the performance of your dry cow regime. Early recording will allow early intervention where there is subclinical mastitis. Book your first recording as soon as possible.
2. Spread nitrogen (N) – follow up your February application after about four weeks. Recommended rates are 23-40 units per acre depending on what has been applied. This will drive grass growth into April as farms move from the first to the second rotation.
3. Weigh maiden heifers – those not at target weight for

ENSURE
your first milk recording takes place within

60

days of your first cow calving.

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breeding will significantly reduce reproductive performance. Weigh heifers and turn out lighter stock to grass along with 2kg of concentrate to achieve 1kg liveweight gain per day, compared to 0.5-0.7kg at best indoors.

4. Breeding preparation – use calving records to identify cows that had health issues (milk fever, retained afterbirth, ketosis, etc.) during calving. Get these cows checked by your vet. You should repeat this in April with later-calved cows. Early examination will ensure these animals are ready for breeding at the start of the season.
5. Pick the dairy and beef bull teams that you are going to use for breeding – you also need to invest as much time into picking the cows that you want to get replacements from. Teagasc Breeding Week takes place from March 25. Keep an eye out for events in your region.

March grazing targets

The objective now is to increase the proportion of the farm grazed, as most farms are behind on grazing. Aim to keep grass in dairy cows' diet as much as possible. As long as ground conditions are adequate, grazing can take place day and night. When ground conditions are difficult, practices should be put in place to keep grass in the diet of the cow without causing serious damage to land. The aim is to have 60-65% of the farm grazed by St Patrick's Day according to the spring rotation planner. However, the planner tracks the proportion of the farm grazed but not grass supply. The planner also offers no information about levels of regrowth. These levels must be tracked from mid March. For those who measure grass, average farm cover should not drop below 550kg DM/ha. Otherwise, growth will be compromised.

Keep grass in the diet of your dairy cows as much as you can.

An eye on supply

Examine your farm for grass supply during March. Watch the recovery of the first paddocks grazed. Walk the farm to ensure that there is enough grass available in April to start the second rotation. The primary time will be the third and fourth weeks of March, and the primary area to look at is the paddocks grazed early. This will tell you what grass recovery has taken place. There will need to be four to five paddocks with a good level of grass recovery to give you an idea as to when the second rotation can begin.

Cow numbers for dairy AI

How many cows do you need to breed to dairy AI to ensure adequate numbers of replacement heifer calves? It depends on the number of heifer replacements required and whether the semen being used is conventional, sexed, or a combination of both. Reducing the number of cows that need to be bred to dairy AI will increase the genetic merit of your replacement heifers but also reduce the number of dairy male calves bred on farm, and increase the number of cows bred to high Dairy Beef Index (DBI) AI bulls.

See **Table 1** for an example of a 100-cow herd where there is a requirement for 22 replacements heifers. All dairy straws used are female sexed semen, and all are used in the first three weeks of breeding. The conception rates used are a guide and should be adjusted to reflect past herd performance. This example assumes a 100% submission rate with the maiden heifers and 90% with the milking herd in the first three weeks of breeding.

Sexed semen helps to increase the beef merit of the calf crop.

Looking at the numbers

As seen in the table, 11 heifer calves are produced from the maiden heifers. Assuming a 50% conception rate to dairy sexed semen on the cows, 25 cows must be bred to produce a further 11 heifers. The number of dairy-bred males born reduces to three due to 90% female probability of sexed semen. The number

Table 1: Example of sexed semen use.

	Straws	Conception	No. heifer calves
Heifers sexed straws	22	55%	11
Heifers conventional straws		65%	0
Total	22		11
	Straws	**Conception**	**No. heifer calves**
Cows sexed straws	25	50%	11
Cows conventional straws		60%	0
Total	25		11
Total heifer calves from cows and heifers	22		
Total dairy males from cows and heifers	3		

of cows bred to high-DBI beef AI in the first three weeks increases in this example to 65.

Concerns

The obvious concern when using sexed semen is reduced conception rates. Therefore, consideration must be given when selecting the animals for sexed dairy AI, the timing of AI, and the handling of the straws. Reduced conception rate is somewhat offset by the fact that sexed semen is only being used on a percentage of the herd, and allows for a larger proportion to be bred to conventional high-DBI beef AI at normal conception rates. The example in question is for a herd achieving high levels of fertility performance. Each individual farmer in consultation with their advisor should develop a plan that aligns with their herd's fertility targets.

Take control of SCC

The early lactation period is important for the control of somatic cell count (SCC). Freshly calved cows are the most vulnerable group, as they are dealing with the stress of calving, and other possible issues such as subclinical milk fever. Do not neglect later-calving cows as the season progresses. Continue with regular runs of automatic scrapers and lime cubicles twice a day in the dry cow area. This will help limit the potential spread of infection. The use of a barrier teat dip post milking can also be very beneficial for the freshly calved cows.

Testing time

The California mastitis test (CMT) should be carried out on all cows before their milk is allowed into the bulk tank. Where a quarter is infected, monitor and treat. If the cow has a history of high SCC in that quarter in the previous lactation, consider culling or drying off the quarter.

Complete your first milk recording in March.

Ensure your first milk recording is done within 60 days of your first cow calving. This will provide an early snapshot of SCC levels within the herd, but also allow for the effectiveness of the dry cow therapy programme to be assessed.

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