Give your stock a clean start before winter housing

Eliminating parasites at housing will ensure optimum livestock performance over the winter

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Longer nights and shorter days. The All-Ireland finals long gone. Children back at school. Winter housing around the corner. We can't do anything about the change of seasons, but you can give your animals a better chance to perform well over the winter with a parasite treatment plan.

Grazing is where cattle usually pick up internal parasites including worms and fluke. Housing is when external parasites like lice and mites thrive. Treating animals who have a parasite burden at housing can reduce the negative effect on health and performance – providing the product works effectively.

This year, especially given the mixed weather conditions over the past few months, there may well be a build-up of internal parasites that requires treatment at housing. Effective treatment means cattle are virtually free of worms and liver fluke until they go back to grass.

Careful planning, prior to housing, and assessing the results of diagnostics tests taken during the grazing season will help you to make informed decisions around dosing.

Peter Bennett dosing animals at Teagasc Grange.

Faecal egg counts

The starting point to assessing internal parasites is completing faecal egg samples from all categories of livestock. Faecal egg sampling can indicate the worm burden in livestock and also the presence of mature fluke.

Faecal egg samples can be relatively cheaply tested and analysed through your local vet or laboratory. The process of taking faecal egg samples is straightforward. Select 10-15 animals, at random, from a group of cattle. Put the animals in a clean concrete yard and allow them to stand there for one hour.

Afterwards collect a fresh faecal sample. Send it to be analysed promptly – delaying the process may result in the eggs hatching and giving an inaccurate result. Faecal samples that are being sent away to be analysed should ideally be posted the day they are collected.

Results

Where possible, avoid completing the task on a Friday or over the weekend. This can mean samples are not tested immediately which, again, can lead to incorrect results. Generally results can take two-three weeks to be issued so consider completing this task as soon as possible to have the test results available when selecting a dosing product.

The presence of worms on a faecal egg test is expressed in eggs per gramme. Animals require a worm dose when the results show a count of greater than 250 eggs per gramme. This outcome indicates a high prevalence of worms living within the animal. As a result the animal's daily liveweight gain will be compromised.

To determine if resistance to wormers is present on farms some farmers have implemented a faecal egg reduction test or drench test. This is the same process – collecting faecal egg samples – from a batch of 10-15 animals before dosing, then applying the dose and re-taking faecal samples 7 to 14 days later (7 days if a yellow product, 14 days if a white or clear product).

A reduction of 95% of eggs per gramme in this test will indicate that the product is working effectively while <95% reduction indicates that resistance to the product is an issue.

Animals recently sent for slaughter usually receive a beef health check report along with the factory cheque. This report gives a score for liver fluke and is a reliable indicator of its presence on your farm.

Faecal sampling should be carried out regularly throughout the grazing period. However, faecal egg counts do not always reflect the presence of inhibited larvae of the stomach worm Ostertagia at housing. Consult your vet about the results prior to dosing. It is important to note that levamisole is not effective against inhibited larvae and is therefore not a good option for a housing dose.

Lungworm

Lungworm is a very common internal parasite that affects the lungs of an animal and can be problematic for all categories of livestock. Lungworms cannot be detected in a standard faecal egg test. If a large proportion of the herd are found to be coughing at grass this can be an indicator of lungworm.

Lungworm usually becomes an issue during the second half of the grazing season and can remain a problem right through to housing. Pastures can become infected with larvae that stick onto the grass sward. Grazing animals pick up larvae with grass and, when digested, the larvae moves from the gut into the lungs.

From there the larvae produce eggs which again hatch and these larvae are passed through the animal in the dung. Sometimes eggs can be coughed up by the animal, and in warm moist weather conditions these eggs may hatch into larvae on grassland.

The grazing pasture can become infected again with new larvae and the cycle continues. Heavy lungworm burdens damage the lungs and airways of cattle. This damage coupled with the stress around housing can trigger the onset of respiratory disease.

Treatment for lungworms is widely available in the form of oral drenches, injectable form or pour on type products. The majority of products that treat for lungworms will also treat for gut worms/round worms.

Fluke

Liver fluke infection has been shown to reduce the finishing weight of steers. Fluke requires the mud snail to complete its lifecycle which is why wetter soil types or areas with high levels of rainfall favour the habitat of mud snails and can result in higher prevalence of fluke in cattle.

Treatment needed for liver fluke varies from farm to farm. Some farms treat for fluke at housing every autumn as there have been issues with the parasite in the past while other farms might not have treated for fluke for many years.

With the wetter weather witnessed this year and regardless of soil type, there may be more farms that need to treat for liver fluke at housing.

Faecal egg testing and reviewing beef health reports from animals slaughtered are the most effective steps to detect the presence of fluke in the herd. Liver fluke are classified as early immature (<6 weeks old), immature (6-12 weeks old) and mature (>12 weeks old).

Be mindful – faecal samples only reflect the presence of mature liver fluke, a negative sample does not always mean that an animal is free of fluke.

There are several products available to treat liver fluke. Triclabendazole is the only active ingredient available on the market to treat all stages of fluke while other products may treat one or two stages of the liver fluke cycle. Resistance to Triclabendazole has been documented in sheep, as it is the same fluke in cattle

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and sheep.

This should be considered when choosing a dose. When using a product that does not kill all stages it may be useful to delay treatment until after housing to allow all of the fluke present to mature so that the product is effective.

Alternatively, a treatment can be given at housing with a repeat treatment 12 weeks later.

External parasite control

External parasites such as lice, mites and other external parasites can spread rapidly on livestock that are housed. External parasites typically spread between animals that are in close contact with each other, so at housing time external parasites can spread rapidly within a group.

Animals with hair loss, excessive scratching around gate posts, are signs that external parasites are active.

Products for treating external parasites can come in both injectable and pour on forms.

The majority of pour on type products on the market will treat for biting or sucking lice/mites on cattle but won't treat for eggs.

A large infestation may require a second treatment three to four weeks after the initial product was administered. Eggs living on the animal's back may hatch and cause a recurring issue with external parasites.

Treat all animals in the same group at the same time. If animals are added to the group they too should be treated without delay.

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Pour on type products require good skin contact on animals for an effective uptake. Clipping animals along their backs will ensure a better uptake of the product. Furthermore, clipping helps keep body temperatures cooler during mild weather conditions.

Selecting a product

There is no one product that can treat everything on your farm. Treating external or internal parasites can involve administering two products at different times. Antimicrobial resistance is becoming a major issue on farms and this is predominately down to incorrect use of products.

This includes overusing certain products, incorrect levels of product used based on liveweight, or using a product not required in the first instance. Recent weighing gives the best indication of how much product is required per animal.

Rotation

Consult with your vet on best practice for dosing products. Rotate different dosing products to prevent resistance building up. Some products may have a different name but contain the same active ingredient.

Selecting a product with a different active ingredient will help prevent antimicrobial resistance. Only use combination products if it is necessary to target multiple parasites.

Products can have varying withdrawal times so be conscious of this if using products on cattle intended for finishing. Of course, after getting a clean start at housing the animals will almost certainly finish sooner.

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