

DAIRY

February 2025

Top five tips for February



Aim to get cows out for least one bout of grazing per day.

1. Achieve at least one grazing every day – spring grass is the best-quality forage available on farm. Cows will benefit from increased total animal dry matter intake, increased energy, and protein density of the diet. The farm business will benefit from improved animal performance and lower feed costs. Aim to get cows out for least one bout of grazing per day, two where conditions and grass budgets allow. On-off grazing may be required during difficult weather or on heavy soils.
2. Consider once-a-day (OAD) milking in February – for some farms the opportunity is there to reduce the workload by milking OAD for the first couple of weeks of the calving season. Teagasc research shows annual milk yield was reduced by only 2% for herds that milked OAD for four weeks, compared to those that milked twice a day (i.e., only the

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earliest calved cows were a full four weeks on OAD) for the entire lactation. This frees up time for cow/calf care in a busy period. The practice is not recommended for herds with an annual somatic cell count (SCC) of higher than 200,000 cells/ml.

3. Include slurry as part of your spring fertiliser plans – slurry contains six units of nitrogen (N), five units of phosphorus (P), and 30 units potassium (K) per 1,000 gallons. It is a valuable nutrient source on farm. Slurry should be targeted to parts of the farm most in need, i.e., silage ground and low P and K index paddocks. Manage slurry applications to ensure it is spread during the appropriate conditions and that no more than 2,500 gallons/acre are applied in each application. Minimise risk of loss to watercourses.
4. Test every batch of colostrum – you can quickly and easily measure colostrum quality by using a Brix refractometer – a reading of 22% or more indicates good quality colostrum. Colostrum quality declines if first milking is delayed more

than six hours, so it is best to milk the cow soon after calving, if possible. Get at least 3L of high-quality colostrum fed in the first two hours after birth. Do not keep low-quality colostrum for freezing.

5. Run a fresh cow group in February – calving is a hectic time on dairy farms. With workload and fatigue comes greater risk of mistakes. A good way to cut down on problems in the parlour is to keep all cows that are still out of the tank in a separate group. It may sound like extra complication but the benefits are: i) less risk of antibiotics in the tank; ii) the fresh group can be milked last so milking the main group is much simpler; iii) it's easier to collect transition milk; and, iv) freshly calved cows get a couple of extra days to recover in a small group. Once cows are settled and back in the tank (seventh milking) they join the main herd. Use tail tape (different colour to treated cows) to mark the cows in the fresh group.

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Take your grazing opportunities

It's that time of year again when the debate on the merits of early grazing kicks off. Depending on the conversation, it is somewhere between an essential practice and a fool's errand to have cows out in February.

Nonetheless, the bottom line is that grazed grass has a rare combination of high feed value (energy, protein) and low cost. The challenge is utilisation in poor conditions, so we need to start with realistic and ambitious targets in mind. The aim is to graze about 20-30% of the farm during February, depending on farm location, calving pattern and stocking rate. Your advisor will help set the best option for your farm. If you are not sure about grazing targets or concerned about ground conditions, the best advice is simply to begin.

What about weather and poor conditions in February? If we look back at previous springs using Moorepark and Ballyhaise as examples (Table 1), we see very different



Waiting until March to graze is no guarantee of better weather.

rainfall profiles. In 2023, February was a relatively dry month whereas March was equally wet in both locations for both years. This underlines the value of taking opportunities to graze early in February as they arise. Waiting until March will not guarantee better weather. This can lead to big problems in a very wet year like 2024. Interestingly in 2024, the Ballyhaise farm (heavy soil) achieved very similar grazing outcomes compared to 2023, by implementing tactics like on-off grazing, having multiple entry points to paddocks, and grazing lower covers first. These help overcome the effects of poor conditions.

Table 1: Spring rainfall (mm per month) for Moorepark and Ballyhaise farms.

Location	Soil type	February 2023	March 2023	February 2024	March 2024
Moorepark	Free draining	17	144	124	140
Ballyhaise	Mixed/heavy	26	130	87	137

Make colostrum testing a habit

Every article on calf health begins with feeding the right colostrum at the right time and quantity. The colostrum 1-2-3 rule helps us quantify what right actually means: feed the first milk the cow

produces, within two hours of birth and feed at least three litres. Get in the habit of testing colostrum using a refractometer. It takes around 45 seconds, so is time consuming, but the payoff is huge.

If the colostrum tests below 22%, feed alternative colostrum instead. Where colostrum is 22% or greater, surpluses should be stored as a backup. Refrigerate within three hours and freeze within 48 hours of collection (Figure 1). Label with time and date. Use zip lock bags

or 1L plastic bottles, which make thawing quicker. Thaw using warm water only; never use boiling water. Having a calf workstation (e.g., with a table, fridge, stomach stubs/teats, water, tags) located in a central location to the calves is key to making all calf rearing tasks easier.

COLOSTRUM STORAGE

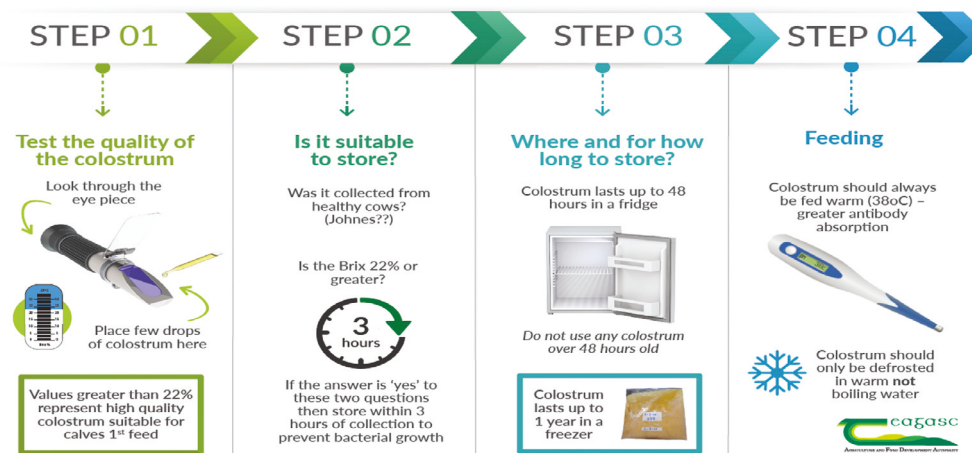


FIGURE 1: Testing, storing and feeding colostrum.

Safety at calving and slurry spreading

With slurry, evacuate all animals and ventilate before you agitate. Select a breezy day and open all doors and outlets to provide a draught. Keep people away from the shed and agitation point for at least 40 minutes after starting. Keep the tank opening secure at all times. Beware of gas in buildings that are linked by tanks or drainage channels. Keep safe during calving. Use calving gates and pens. Keep a physical barrier between you and a calving cow at all times.



HEALTH AND SAFETY

Beware of cows with calves.