



April 2014

Grass tetany risk

Both spring and autumn calving cows going to grass suckling calves will be at risk from grass tetany, particularly if they are forced to clean out paddocks when weather is changeable, as it is too often in April. The other factor that will increase the risk is the increase in the use of potassium fertilisers as we try and rebuild low soil phosphorous (P) and potassium (K) indexes.

The condition is due to an acute lack of magnesium (Mg) in the blood. Cows are unable to use stored Mg effectively and, for that reason, need a daily intake of between 20-30g of Mg.

There are a number of ways to supplement cows with Mg and it is a case of choosing the right one for your farm:

- magnesium in the water. Mg can be added to the water as a soluble salt or some companies sell a soluble Mg solution. They can be added to drinking troughs manually or via a proportioner pump. For this method to work effectively, the only water source available to cows must be drinking troughs;
- pasture dusting with cal/mag at a rate of 15-17kg/ha. Grass should ideally be damp when applying so that the dust sticks to the leaf. Labour intensive method;
- high Mg licks are commonly used and can be highly effective provided all the cows are taking them;
- magnesium bolus. The number of boluses will vary depending on the product used and will generally give about four weeks protection. The downside to this method is that it is labour intensive and boluses can be regurgitated;
- some individuals just supplement the cows with extra forage at grass, such as hay, silage, or straw;
- 50:50 Calmag molasses solution placed in a tub in the field with free access to stock. The tub needs to be stirred morning and evening to stop the calmag separating out. 20kg of molasses and 20kg of Calmag would do 50 cows for one week; and,
- feed a high Mg nut to cows. This can be costly if you have to feed much more than 1kg of nuts to get the 50-60g of calmag needed. It can also be difficult in wet weather and there is a safety issues when feeding cows with young calves at grass.

ICBF Beef GEN€ IRELAND Programme spring 2014

Most suckler farmers running spring calving herds will now be switching their attention to breeding and getting their cows back in calf. The breeding choices made now have the potential to have a long-term impact on the genetic merit of a herd and, in turn, its future output and profitability. That is why bull selection is so vitally important on a suckler farm. For herds where artificial insemination (AI) is a viable option, farmers will be interested to know that ICBF has launched its new GEN€ IRELAND progeny test programme. As the national suckler herd has seen a sharp decline in maternal traits (milk and fertility) over the last 15-20 years, the programme is primarily focused on improving maternal traits by testing high replacement index bulls. These bulls have been sourced from pedigree beef herds signed up to an elite

breeding initiative with ICBF called the Maternal Bull Breeder Programme. All bulls are of excellent quality, with very high indices and ICBF is looking for farmers to use semen in their herds in order to carry out a full progeny test. The benefits of using these bulls are:

- reduced price of €5 per straw;
- significant genetic improvement in your herd;
- fulfilling BTAP task 3B (Participate in GEN€ IRELAND);
- free weighing of progeny by an ICBF weighing technician; and,
- herds will be eligible to have animals bought at a premium price for the Tully test centre.

For more information on the programme or to order straws, please do not hesitate to call ICBF on 1850 600 900.

Mark it in your diary

On Wednesday, June 18, Teagasc will hold a BEEF 2014 day for everyone involved in the beef industry in our research centre at Grange, Dunsany, Co. Meath. It will be the flagship event held by Teagasc in 2014. The event will focus on the key technical messages in beef and there will be a number of information villages set up along the route dealing with issues such as animal health, breeding, land drainage, soils, grassland, CAP reform, etc. Each village will have experts

available to discuss the various topics and there will be a number of brief presentations/demonstrations run at regular intervals. All the major industry stakeholders will be on site on the day so it will provide a great opportunity to meet with them and hear about some of the new technologies that will be coming on stream in the beef sector. The day is already BTAP approved and should be a key day for all discussion groups to attend.

Grassland

Soil temperatures have held up very well despite the poor weather but we are probably behind with slurry and fertiliser applications. As soon as conditions allow, get fertiliser out on grazing ground, otherwise you could run tight on grass at the end of the month. Even farms stocked below 170kgOrgN should have applied 50-60 units of nitrogen by early May on grazing ground. Unless you know that your

soils are at index 3 or better for P and K, then you can consider urea or calcium ammonium nitrate (CAN). Otherwise, to get the best kick from spring growth, you need to use a compound with Pand K.

If you have slurry to apply, get it out on silage ground after it has been grazed and before closing up. At this stage, slurry earmarked for grazing ground is best applied after cattle have grazed out the paddock.



HEALTH & SAFETY

Be careful when cutting timber

Following the February storm, there is a lot of wind-blown timber on farms. Cutting-up and removing this timber is potentially dangerous and needs to be risk assessed. The key decision is to assess what timber cutting you can do yourself and what is left to the professional. Cutting down trees generally, or hung-up or blow-over trees, which are hinged at the root, is particularly dangerous. Timber under tension is also dangerous, as it can split and strike a person. Chainsaws need to have a full range of safety features including a safety chain, chain brake, chain catcher, and be correctly sharpened. Wearing chainsaw protective equipment is vital, this includes: clothing and gloves with ballistic nylon; helmet with visor and ear defenders; and, suitable footwear.



Chainsawing can be lethal.

Further information can be found at www.hsa.ie.



RESEARCH UPDATE

Validating the maternal index

An update from Robert Prendiville and Noirin McHugh on validating the maternal index of the heifers.

Profitable suckler beef enterprises, where low-input seasonal production systems are the focal point of production, are dependent on cows calving in a timely fashion (allowing milk production to coincide with pasture growth). This, in turn, means that cows achieve their required intake from pasture with limited concentrate supplementation and thus, efficiently convert grazed pasture to product. Cows most suited to the system should display a predisposition for high grass intake per unit live weight and high milk yield per kg dry matter intake, without negative consequences on longevity. The contribution of the breeding suckler cow to overall efficiency and profitability within the beef herd and the beef sector cannot be overstated. Current industry figures show that, on average, suckler cows are 30 months of age at first calving, have calving intervals of greater than 415 days and, on average, only produce two calves in their lifetime. Such performance in beef herds is unsustainable. In 2012, the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (ICBF) launched the 'maternal index', the aim of which is to identify animals suitable for breeding or selecting replacements. The maternal herd was established at Grange to validate this index using heifers generated from bulls of high and low maternal index (Figure 1). Heifers from Aberdeen Angus and

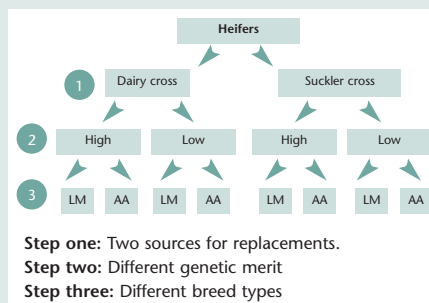


Figure 1: Summary of the study design for the maternal herd.

Limousin sires, commonly used across dairy and suckler herds, were used to establish the herd. These heifers are calving for the first time this spring. All heifers were bred to Aberdeen Angus and Limousin bulls that were selected on the basis of their ease of calving and high terminal traits.

The focus of the study is centred on validating the maternal index of the heifers. The research will be carried out to:

- determine the milk yield of the cow;
- attain estimates of grass dry matter intakes at pasture;
- investigate differences in reproductive efficiency, and,
- carry out a full economic appraisal of heifers sired by high or low sires for terminal traits.

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