

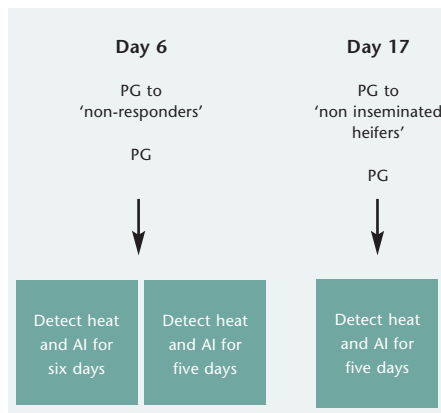


May 2014

Synchronised breeding of heifers

There are a number reasons why suckler farmers should consider synchronising their maiden heifers so they can all be bred at the same time. The big advantage is that you have the majority of them calving at the start of the calving season the following year, which is important if you want to maintain or tighten your herd's calving pattern. It also allows you to choose artificially inseminated (AI) bulls that have a high reliability for easy calving (less than 4% serious calving difficulty). Recent ICBF data shows that, on average, suckler replacement heifers are being bred to beef bulls with above-recommended calving difficulty figures. Once suckler heifers are already showing signs of heat, they will show a very good response to synchronisation regimes that use prostaglandin injections. These regimes are simple to manage and are relatively inexpensive to administer (under veterinary control). The simplest method is to inject the heifers with a prostaglandin product twice, 11 days apart, and then inseminate them 72 and 96 hours after the second injection. An alternative method is shown

below where you heat detect the heifers for six days and inseminate cows that are bulling. You then inject them with prostaglandin (PG) and again inseminate any that are bulling. Eleven days later you repeat it.



This regime will result in 90% of your heifers being inseminated within 10 days. Approximately 65–70% should go in calf to this. The remaining heifers should respond to the second injection with similar conception results.

Managing May grass

Grass growth rates per day can be very high during the month of May. On low to medium-stocked beef farms they can be much higher than what is eaten per day, even with a high proportion of the farm closed for silage. Once this starts to happen, grass covers can very quickly start to build too fast ahead of stock and the quality of that grass inevitably starts to fall, leading to lower performance and poorly grazed out swards. The only way to avoid this happening is to walk all of the grazing fields once a week to see how much grass you have ahead of you. Ideally, you should not have more than 10 to 12 days of grass in front of cattle at this time of the year and be



Aim for 10–12 days of grass ahead of stock and remove surpluses.

going in to graze fields that have 8–10cm of grass on them. If you have more grass than this, then heavy paddocks need to be skipped in the grazing rotation and cut as surplus bales of silage so that they can return as soon as possible.

Market difficulties

Spring 2014 will go down as one of the most difficult number of months that finishers of bulls, steers, and heifers will have experienced in many years. The collapse in bull prices, the introduction of new weight limits by a lot of the meat processors and the severe delays experienced by many in just getting cattle killed has caused significant hardship on many farms. While many have put forward reasons for why these changes in the market have come about, there are still a lot of questions that beef farmers are looking to get answers to. Are bulls going to be a viable beef system on Irish farms? If yes, do they all have to be under 16 months at slaughter? If they can be over 16 months how old can they be? What will their pricing

structure be in comparison to steers and heifers? What weight limits, if any, are going to apply to bull, steer, and heifer carcasses? While the industry has given very broad market specifications, what is becoming apparent is that one market specification does not fit all when it comes to different processors. It is for this reason that beef farmers must talk to the factories that they are supplying cattle to, in order to get clarity on what they require and the basis for any future pricing arrangements. Standard advice on different bull and steer finishing systems is also not appropriate at the moment, due to the huge amount of uncertainty in the market surrounding specifications.

Clean out infection

May is the month to get all cattle sheds on the farm cleaned out, power washed, and disinfected. By having them cleaned out and dry, they can be exposed to the natural disinfecting properties of the sun over the entire summer. This is widely recognised as one of the best practices that livestock farmers can do to reduce infections in cattle houses, well in advance of next winter's housing. It also means there is less of a rush next autumn and shows what



Clean out sheds in May so sunlight can disinfect them.

barriers/gates/troughs, etc., need to be fixed over the summer months.

Teagasc BEEF 2014

Preparations are now in full swing for our major beef open day "Beef 2014 – The Business of Cattle" on June 18 in Teagasc, Grange. As outlined in last month's newsletter, all of the main beef industry stakeholders will be present on the day – ICBF, AHI, Bord Bia, Department of Agriculture, *Irish Farmers Journal*, UCD, meat processors, breed societies, and AI companies. Visitors on the day will get to meet Teagasc beef researchers and advisors on a wide range of topics, all designed to help improve your

farm's profitability.

Towards the end of the day there will be a special forum on 'My Future in Beef', which will include leading beef farmers on how they are planning their future as beef producers. They will talk about their individual farming operations and the steps they have taken to ensure a profitable and competitive beef business. This forum is kindly sponsored by the FBD Trust. Remember the place to be on Wednesday, June 18 is in Teagasc Grange.



HEALTH & SAFETY

Farm safety awareness

The Health and Safety Authority has just held a 'Farm Safety Fortnight' to highlight safety on Irish farms. In the first quarter of 2014, tragically, six farmers died compared to one for the same quarter in 2013. Being crushed

by a tractor or machine has been the main factor associated with recent farm deaths. Make sure that tractors can be secured when stationary and work safely when close to tractors and machines.



RESEARCH UPDATE

Cattle nutrition

Mark McGee, Aidan Moloney and Eddie O’Riordan report on studies at Teagasc Grange.

Farm profitability is a function of total revenue minus total costs. Central to beef production is conversion of feed to product. Feed provision, particularly during the indoor winter period, accounts for over 75% of variable costs of beef production. For this reason, beef production systems should aim to maximise the proportion of grazed grass in the diet and maximise animal output from grazed grass, due to its considerably lower comparative cost. For example, in seasonal, grass-based, suckler beef systems, this is achieved through having a relatively high stocking rate, a concentrated calving season that coincides with the start of the (long) grazing season, and good grassland management that delivers high pasture production and utilisation and, high individual animal performance. The annual feed budget of a Grange grass-based, suckler calf-to-beef system (~135 day winter period) producing steers at 24 months and heifers at 20 months of age, has been calculated. In that system, about two-thirds of the feed consumed annually is comprised of grazed grass, with the remainder made up of grass silage (27%) and concentrates (8%). However, when this feed budget is expressed in terms of cost, the outcome is very different, in that grazed grass makes up only 19% of total feed cost, whereas grass silage accounts for 54% and concentrates accounts for 27%



On-going experiments at Grange are evaluating the nutritive value of concentrates.

of total feed costs. This means that in the context of input costs, there is much greater scope for reducing production system feed costs during occasions when grass silage and/or concentrates are offered, i.e., principally during indoor periods. Clearly then, a key goal is to optimise feed (cost) efficiency at these times. In this respect, on-going experiments at Grange are evaluating the nutritive value of concentrate feedstuffs and concentrate supplementation rates and strategies in order to further enhance production efficiency, profitability, and product quality on beef cattle farms. The results of these Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine-funded studies will be coming on-stream over the medium term.

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.