Most beef farms can grow more grass.

Teagasc Advisory Newsletter

BEEF

February 2016

Growing more grass

Can your farm produce more grass in 2016 than it did in 2015? For the vast majority of beef farmers the answer to this question is most definitely yes and it has nothing to do with the weather. Results from the National Farm Survey show that the average suckler beef farmer utilises just 5.5 tons (t) of grass dry matter each year, when there is the potential on many beef farms to grow and use almost double this figure. Remember, growing more grass is the same as increasing your farm size. There are four key ways that will ensure that more grass will be grown on all farms:

(i) having the correct phosphorus (P), potassium (K) and lime status;

(ii) having a rotational grazing system;

(iii) reseeding poor performing swards; and,

(iv) applying more nitrogen (N).

Before grazing starts in 2016, the first two of these should be looked at. If you need to take soil samples, do so before you apply any slurry or bagged fertiliser. Soils that are low in P and K or in need of lime cannot grow anywhere near the amount of grass that they have the potential to grow. Seven out of 10 fields on beef farms need lime, which is one of the least expensive elements to get right and, when corrected, releases locked up N, P and K in soils. Where only the lime status on a farm is corrected, grass growth can increase by an average of 1.0t of dry matter per hectare in the year.

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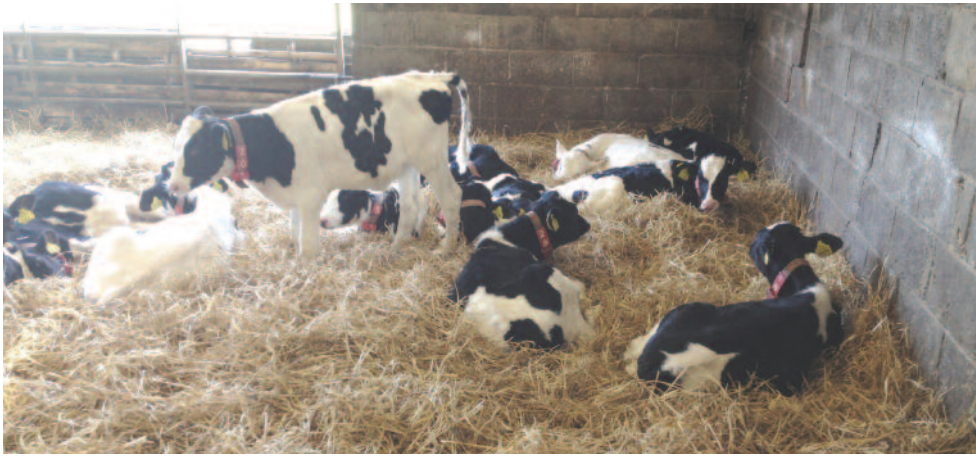
In this issue

Teagasc
Agriculture and Food Development Authority

February is also the month to divide up large grazing fields with permanent fencing and to install water troughs where they are needed so that a proper rotational grazing system can be put in place before grazing starts. The experience of beef farms that have invested in fencing and water is that it more than pays for itself within one year through extra production. The aim should be that each group of animals grazing has at least six different grazing divisions to rotate around on the farm.

Managing bought-in calves



Ensure that calves have an abundance of straw under them.

Buying young dairy-bred calves for rearing is becoming popular once again on many beef farms. How these calves are managed and fed up until they are weaned off milk replacer is critical to their lifetime performance subsequently.

- **Isolate bought-in calves and give them electrolytes as their first feed on the farm.**
- **Protein levels in the milk replacer should be 23-26%.**
- **Feed six litres (L) per day of milk replacer at 12.5-15% solids.**
- **For 12.5% solids, use 125g of powder in 875ml of water to make one litre of milk.**
- **Use water below 40ºC to avoid damaging the powder.**
- **Avoid once-a-day feeding until calves are four weeks of age.**
- **Be consistent with feeding times, temperature of milk, concentration and volume of milk.**
- **Cleanliness and hygiene are critical.**
- **Ensure that calves have an abundance of straw under them.**
- **Make sure there are no draughts in the calf shed but, equally importantly, make sure there is enough inlet and outlet ventilation.**

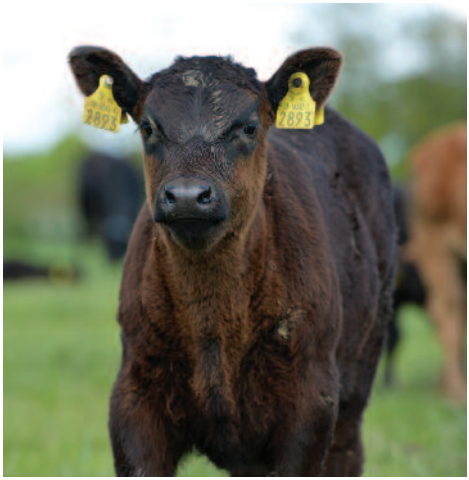
The experience of the Teagasc Green Acres Calf to Beef Programme in 2015 was that the farms that vaccinated their calves against the common respiratory diseases at purchase tended to have healthier calves and better daily gains throughout the year. Speak to your vet about the vaccination programme that would be most suited to your farm.

Calf scours

One of the biggest killers of newborn calves is infectious scours. Early and correct treatment goes a long way to getting the calf back on track. It is essential that the calf and suckler cow are isolated immediately from all the other calves in the group to avoid other calves becoming infected.
Dehydration is what kills the calves so the sooner they are given fluids the better. Calves that are dehydrated will be weak and listless with their eyes sunken in their head. In severe cases they will be unable to rise and will have cold ears and feet. Feed two litres, two to three times per day, of a good electrolyte solution (four to six litres in total). Continue to feed the calf milk, i.e., leave them on the cow (in the case of artificially-reared calves continue to feed milk replacer). Keeping the calf on milk helps to maintain its condition, speeds up its recovery and prevents it from starving. Continue to give electrolytes until the dung consistency is normal or the skin elasticity is back to normal. Antibiotics should only be used where a calf has developed a high temperature. In the case of severe dehydration, fluids should be given intravenously by a vet.
An ongoing Teagasc study funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, across a large number farms, has shown that 21% of young suckler calves do not have enough antibodies in their blood to protect them, indicating that they are not getting enough colostrum at birth. The first six hours after birth is the critical time period. If they do not get at least three litres of colostrum into them in these first few hours of life they are likely to be low in the essential antibodies that they need to protect them. Good hygiene, disinfection of calving areas and plenty of dry clean straw under calves also goes a long way to preventing scours.

Beef Data Genomics Programme

A high percentage of the participants in the Beef Data and Genomics Programme have tagged and returned the genotype samples they were asked for, and have filled in and returned the survey forms. Remember, you only need to do this for the calves that were born up until June 30, 2015, to get your full 2015 payment. Full payments have begun to farmers who have sent in at least 60% of the information that was required and 90% of the genotype samples. As more farmers meet these requirements they will be paid on an ongoing basis. If you have not done either of these yet, make sure you do as soon as possible so that your payment can be issued. Inspections are to take place on a small proportion of farms and their payments are delayed until after this inspection has taken place.



Return all relevant data and genotype samples to ensure you are paid.

RESEARCH UPDATE

Pre-calving management of the suckler cow

Mervyn Parr and David Kenny, AGRIC, Teagasc, Grange examined pre-calving management of the suckler cow to shorten the interval from calving to re-breeding.

One of the major factors affecting reproductive performance in beef cows is the interval between calving and the resumption of normal heat cycles. To achieve a 365-day calving interval, the cow must become pregnant within 85 days of calving. Adequate nutrition in the period before calving, reflected in body condition score (BCS), is a critical determinant of the length of time between when the cow calves and she has her first heat. For example, work conducted by Teagasc has clearly shown that cows calving in moderate to good condition (BCS 2.5 to 3.5, on a scale of 1 to 5) will show heat, on average, two to three weeks earlier than cows calving in poor condition (BCS <2). Where cows do calve in poor BCS, additional feeding after calving will only have a limited effect on shortening the interval to first heat. Thus it is very important to monitor the condition of cows in the last third of pregnancy and take corrective action where condition is poor. This is particularly warranted for younger cows and heifers because, after calving, these animals require additional energy to support their own growth as well as their requirements for lactation.

Mineral nutrition of the cow is also important for health and fertility. In particular, deficiencies in certain trace elements have been associated with greater health issues in both cows (particularly retained afterbirth) and calves, as well as potentially lower fertility in the cow. Preliminary findings from a large Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) funded on-farm beef cow fertility trial, indicate that many cows are deficient in selenium and iodine even when at grass for a number of months. It is thus likely that the situation will be worse over the winter and early spring, while cows are consuming silage. Thus, it is important to ascertain herd status for important trace elements (copper, iodine and selenium) and take remedial action, where necessary.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Use TAMS to improve your safety

During February the spring farm workload increases. Workload must be managed as rushing and tiredness are major causes of farm accidents. Are there any short-term changes that you could make to cut workload this spring? Improving facilities for moving stock is one possible change. On a more long-term basis consider changes to include in your TAMS grant application to improve farm safety, cut workload and gain efficiency. These include livestock handling facilities, electrical and lighting installations, slurry aeration, slats and access points, along with safety rails and sliding doors.