

Getting ready for calving

Compact calving helps to maximise grass utilisation and profitability; preparation can ease the inevitable work peaks

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Teagasc Moorepark work shows that to optimise profitability at least nine out of 10 cows (90%) should give birth in the first six weeks of the calving season. Profitability per cow in the herd declines by €8.22 for every 1% six-week calving rate below the 90% target.

A 100-cow herd achieving a six-week calving rate of 90%, will be €12,000 more profitable than a herd at 75%.

About half of this difference is due to lower milk sales (mainly among the late calvers). The balance is due to poorer fertility, and an estimated 3% higher replacement rate caused by the later-calving cows.

Nationally, calving has also become increasingly concentrated as the fertility and size of the national dairy herd has increased. In 2010, approximately 270,000 calves were born in February; an estimated 670,000 will be born in February 2023.

Study

Managing compact calving demands a high level of organisation and planning before the calving season begins.

Conor Hogan and Marion Beecher from Teagasc Moorepark conducted a springtime labour study on 76 spring-calving dairy farms carrying an average of 137 cows in the spring and early summer of 2019.

Their study extended beyond calf rearing to encompass all of the tasks carried out in springtime on Irish dairy farms.

Average hours worked per day were 15.4 and 15.7 hours in February and March, respectively. This declined



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Table 1: Factors associated with the labour efficiency for calf care during the February-June period on the study farms

Factor	Hours saved per cow
Calves trained on group feeders at 1-4 days	0.52
Automated or ad lib calf feeding once the calf was trained to suck	0.71
Not rearing the bull calves on the farm of birth	0.69
Sending calves to be contract reared before they were weaned	0.79

to 14.0, 14.9 and 13.4 hours per day in April, May and June.

Efficiency, measured as the number of hours worked per cow, was greater in larger herds. But irrespective of herd size, the authors observed considerable variation between farms in the number of hours worked per cow.

The work associated with calf rearing during February-June averaged 3.44 hours/cow or 14% of the total time spent on dairy farms during the period.

The study identified four strategies on the featured farms that helped to reduce the hours worked that were

associated with calf rearing (see Table 1).

I asked four of the Teagasc Tirlán Joint Programme Focus Farmers for their top tips for the busy calving season ahead in 2023.

All of the four are specialised dairy farmers and have experience of the labour-saving practices highlighted by the study.

In summary, they rear very few bull calves, train the calves onto group feeders from a young age and some of them use automated feeders to rear the calves retained. None of them send their calves for contract rearing.

Kevin Murphy

Farming just outside Gorey, Co Wexford, Kevin and Ann Murphy milk just over 300 spring-calving dairy cows. In 2022, over 260 cows calved in the first six weeks of the calving season, which started on 26 January. Kevin's top tips are:

- "Get the facilities ready well ahead of calving – we'll have the sheds bedded and disinfected and pens set up well in advance."
- "We aim to get the cows to grass as soon as ever possible after calving – it makes a big difference to reducing the spring workload when they're outside."
- "We've a vaccination policy in place for Rotavirus with the herd divided into early and late-calving groups and vaccinated accordingly – afterwards it's vital to make sure that the calves get enough colostrum to protect them in the first few weeks."



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Steven Fitzgerald

Steven farms at Aglish, west Waterford. His calving season is very compact with 154 cows calved in a six-week period in 2022 and the remaining 14 cows in the next 18 days. Not surprisingly, he's highly organised when it comes to the calving season.

Like Kevin, his priority now is to get everything prepared for the coming calving season. In addition, his other top tips are:

- "I believe in the importance of having the cows in tip top shape at calving. A healthy cow has a healthy calf and all the straw in the world won't compensate for a weak calf.
- "We'll have a weekend away in mid-January – it gets us ready to 'roll' before calving starts."



Donal Kavanagh

Donal and Fiona Kavanagh farm in Kildare, close to the Wicklow town of Baltinglass. They are liquid milk producers and just over three quarters of the 240-strong dairy herd calves in the spring. He prepares shed space, orders tags, disinfects and vaccinates like Kevin and Steven well in advance of the calving season.



According to Donal, "I put leg bands on the cows as they're dried off. The colour of the leg band is linked to the expected calving date so I know at a glance which cows are close to calving. "It takes a lot of the work out of sorting the cows around calving time. We'll record the colours of the leg bands on a whiteboard so that everyone knows what the colours mean."

Coccidiosis in dairy calves – your help needed to influence our advice

With the start of the busy spring calving season close at hand, it's time to focus on coccidiosis, a disease which continues to be a concern on many calf-rearing farms.

Coccidiosis mainly causes clinical disease in calves from three weeks to nine months of age.

The most recent all-Island Animal Disease Surveillance Report details the percentage of samples submitted to Regional Veterinary Laboratories returning positive results for coccidial oocysts.

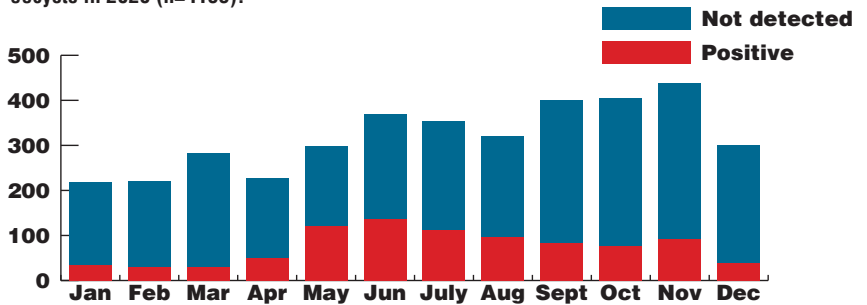
Coccidia are excreted in the dung and are ingested by a susceptible calf in dung-contaminated bedding, feed or water. A single ingested coccidia oocyst develops into thousands of new parasites, each of which destroys the calf's gut lining resulting in very rapid and severe damage to the gut and which can lead to diarrhoea, dysentery (bloody diarrhoea), dehydration, tenesmus (straining), loss of condition and possible death.

The summary of their results, presented in Figure 1, shows a rise in the proportion of samples testing positive for coccidial oocysts throughout the spring, reaching a peak in May. This reflects the infection pressure of increasing numbers of calves in spring-calving herds, especially while the calves are housed.

Infective coccidia oocysts are highly resistant to environmental conditions, both in housing and on pasture, so premises and fields can remain contaminated for a year or more. Calves are commonly infected

Figure 1

Number of bovine faecal samples (all ages) tested for coccidiosis oocysts in 2020 (n=4133).



through ingestion of coccidia oocysts from bedding or pasture, which previously have carried infected cattle (possibly including adult cows). Stressors, such as weaning, turnout, change of diet and poor weather may precipitate outbreaks of disease.

As warm, damp conditions are necessary to allow oocysts to become capable of infecting animals, it is important to avoid dampness in bedding or around water bowls/drinking or

feeding troughs.

A lot of the damage and clinical signs can be seen in calves before coccidia oocysts appear in the faeces. So sampling of a number of calves in the affected group including contemporaries which have not yet developed clinical disease is important.

This might help in the detection of coccidia oocysts and in the diagnosis of the cause of the clinical signs seen.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's Regional Veterinary Laboratories, Teagasc and UCD are carrying out research on coccidiosis in dairy calves. The research will find out what dairy farmers are currently doing to control, prevent and treat coccidiosis. You can participate in the study by scanning the QR code and completing the survey on your mobile phone. This survey will take approximately three minutes to complete and it is entirely anonymous. The results of this research will influence future Teagasc advice on how to control coccidiosis on dairy farms.



Tom and David Fennelly

The Fennellys milk 260 spring-calving dairy cows near Portarlington, Co Laois. Almost 240 of them calved in the first six weeks of the calving season in 2022. Having enough help around is a key part of the Fennellys' plan to making the upcoming calving season easier for them.

According to Tom, "We've a full-time person already working with us on the farm and plan to take on a dedicated milker for morning and evening milkings this spring. This will lighten the workload and give us more time to concentrate on the cows and calves."



Tom Fennelly.



David Fennelly.

Summary

With the busy springtime calving period imminent, the research study highlights the potential of labour-saving technologies to reduce the time required to rear calves. All of the farmers that I interviewed rated being prepared very highly.

All employ one or more of the key calf-rearing practices that the study identified as important in saving labour during the spring. And, finally, remember to be kind to yourself in the run-up to (and during) the calving season.

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