Teagasc Advisory Newsletter

DAIRY

May 2023

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Top five tips for May

1) Milk production costs have risen significantly in the last 24 months. This was masked last year by strong milk prices; however, the price-cost situation has disimproved over the spring. Examine your cost base and complete a cash budget for the remainder of the year.

2) Keep pre-grazing grass covers at the optimal three leaf stage (1,400kg per ha covers). This will drive milk solids. If grass is getting towards heading out, skip it for surplus bales and move to the next paddock with ideal covers.

3) Will you have enough silage for next winter? Do an early budget. Delaying silage cutting date to bulk up the crop will not solve a deficit. Plan for an extra second cut area if needed.

4) Deal with any non-cycling cows immediately, including any cow calved more than 30 days. Don't wait for a natural heat as time is ticking on the breeding season already.

5) Peak spring work has now passed and while farms remain busy, daily routines are more easily planned. Get clusters on by 3.30pm – this will put a better structure on the working day.

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Grazing management and white clover swards

Best practice grazing management is similar for grass-white clover swards and grass-only swards. Flexibility and willingness to adapt to the conditions are important when managing grass-white clover swards. Good grazing management is also important for increased persistence and production of white clover in grazed swards:

- maintain pre-grazing herbage mass between 1,300 and 1,500kg DM/ha (8 and 10cm);
- target a post-grazing sward height of 4.0cm; and,
- chemical nitrogen (N) fertiliser may be reduced on swards with good white clover content (≥20% sward clover content) to half the normal rate for each rotation (10-12kg N/ha or 8-10 units N/acre).

May is generally the month when the rate of grass growth reaches its peak for the year. Grass supply can change fast. How you respond to grass growth is key. You have to be aware of what is happening on the farm in terms of grass growth. Grass grows at a rate of 60-70kg DM/ha/day during May. So a 20-day rotation will result in 1,300-1,400kg/ha of grass being grown in this three-week period.

Stay close to a 20-day rotation to maximise performance.

Every effort must be made to get cows to graze the right grass. Keeping the right grass in front of the cows by staying close to a 20-day rotation is critical to maximise the performance of the herd. The average farm cover (AFC) should be at 160-180kg DM/cow. This is equivalent to an AFC of around 600-700kg DM/ha.

Correct paddock size

With weather and ground conditions improving, there is an opportunity to remove the strip wire. Twelve-hour allocations (two grazing allowances offered per day) still occur on many farms throughout the summer months. However, there are many benefits to making the change to 24-/36-hour paddocks, which include:

- less work setting up and moving fencing reels every milking;

- higher cow intake, particularly for first lactation cows;
- better grass utilisation; and,
- increased cow performance.

With so many potential benefits, why are 12-hour allocations still happening? Tradition, cows having to cross roads and existing paddock sizes are commonly cited as the main reasons. Tradition is a habit and can be changed. To make this easier, modify some paddock sizes to match herd demand to 24/36 hours.
For example: 100-cow herd X 18kg per head per day = 1,800kg required for 24 hours.
If there are 1,400kg in the paddock, then 1,800/1,400 = 1.3ha paddock size for 24 hours and 2ha for 36 hours. How many of your paddocks are of adequate size like this? How many can be easily changed? You may not be able to get all paddocks at the right size but having as many as possible will be a great help. What can you do when you are crossing roads? What is the alternative to having the cows at home after the evening milking and across the road after the morning milking?
Table 1 shows that cows can go into a new 24-hour paddock each day and can get a full intake. This also means fewer chances of over-allocation of grass, which will result in poor grass utilisation and cow production. Furthermore, cows are still being located near the parlour for the morning milking. For farms where roads are not being crossed, 24-/36-hour allocations should be seriously considered. Ask yourself is current grass allocation hitting cow production, decreasing grass growth, and increasing workload? Make a plan to adjust paddock sizes and access as needed.

There are many benefits to 24-/36-hour paddocks.

Table 1: Example of allocating grass when crossing roads.

Monday evening	Cows into a new 24-hour paddock around the yard.
Tuesday morning	Cows across road to a new 24-hour paddock.
Tuesday evening	Cows back to finish off Monday evening's paddock.
Wednesday morning	Cows back to finish off Tuesday morning's paddock.
Wednesday evening	Cows into a new 24-hour paddock around the yard.

Breeding – deal with problem cows early

Breeding season is now in full swing and the majority of eligible cows will be submitted by mid May on most farms. It is important to focus on those cows not bred to date, i.e., late calvers (cows that have calved after March 20) and problem cows (cows with issues since calving, such as retained placenta, milk fever, ketosis, displaced abomasum, mastitis or even lameness). All of these can induce suboptimal reproductive performance. Early intervention will maximise the likelihood of success, as it increases the number of chances that the cow has to go in calf. Fertility generally improves on the second and subsequent oestrus cycles after calving. On the other hand, waiting until the final month of the breeding season to deal with problem cows is going to result in limited success. Examine records to identify high-risk cows, have them examined by your vet, and treat as appropriate, e.g., washout, treatment to induce cycling. Reducing the number of mature cows culled to infertility will have a significant benefit to herd maturity and replacement costs, so the efforts are economically justified.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Safety this breeding season

May is a very active farming month, particularly with machinery work, including spraying, silage harvesting, and fertiliser and slurry spreading. May is also one of the main breeding months on many farms. Health and Safety Authority (HSA) figures show that bulls were involved in over 16% of livestock-related deaths on Irish farms in the last 10 years. It is important that facilities for cattle handling are present, appropriate, well designed and maintained, and that tasks with animals are properly planned and organised. Many accidents with bulls take place in the open field during the main mating season. Always keep the bull in your sight and plan a means of protection or an escape route. A tractor or other suitable farm vehicle (i.e., Jeep) can be useful to make sure there is a safe refuge available when you need to go into a field where a bull is running with the cows.

Beware of bulls.

Remember: always seek help when carrying out tasks that involve bulls. Keep a mobile phone in your pocket so you can call for help if needed. Someone should be aware of where you are and when you expect to return.

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