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Top five tips for September



1. Good hygiene when drying off cows, and clean cubicle beds, after drying are crucial. Examine records carefully (especially the last milking recording) to identify cows suitable for selective therapy. Speak to your vet about this.
2. Give thin cows an extra three to four weeks dry to recover condition before calving next spring. Cows under body condition score (BCS) 2.75 should be dried off by mid November if calving in February.
3. Test your silage for quality and mineral content. It will help you make much better winter management decisions.
4. Weigh your heifers at housing to track daily gain on silage. The target is 18-20kg per month.
5. A lot has changed for dairy farmers in 2023. Take some time to review the direction of your operation for 2024 and beyond. The Teagasc Dairy Conference on November 29 will discuss the main issues.

Stop grazing in time for spring

With reduced milk prices and tight feed stocks on some farms this autumn, it might be tempting to 'shorten the winter' by grazing on a bit longer if ground conditions allow. However, this is usually a false economy. The

main priority for all farm types is to have lots of grass next spring and cows out grazing early (in an average spring it's worth close to €300 per day for 100 cows). This sets up the cows and the swards for reaching their

potential through the next grazing season. When should you stop grazing and house cows and stock for the winter period? The average farm cover (AFC) targets are shown in **Table 1**. Use them to take the guesswork out of housing stock. Know the one that's one too many – don't be tempted to graze the next

paddock to the detriment of next year's cow performance. Stick to these targets and you will reap the benefit when spring comes.

Table 1 shows the AFC targets for December 1 for various stocking rates. It also highlights where the AFC should be on November 15 to reach the December 1 target.

Table 1: AFC targets for December 1.

Stocking rate (LU/ha)	AFC on November 15 (kg DM/ha)	Closing AFC December 1 (kg DM/ha)
2.5	500	650
3.0	550	700
3.5	600	750

Assessing silage quantity and quality

Heavy October rainfall forced most dairy farmers to house cows on silage earlier than expected. In many cases grazing will and should continue, at least by day, into mid November; however, conserved forage is now part of the cows' diet until next spring. We recently surveyed hundreds of dairy and beef farmers to assess fodder stocks. Fewer than 10% of those farms had tested silage quality for the coming winter. This means that the majority of farms have many tonnes of feed sitting in the yard with no information as to its quality. Would we be satisfied to receive a delivery of concentrate without getting a docket on its ingredients and feed value? Most likely not. However, silage quality is by far the more important issue for the cost and performance of the winter diet. A simple, cheap test will give you valuable information on this year's feed and good guidance on what to improve for next year.

Table 2 shows the main factors used to measure the quality of grass silage. These are divided into two main categories – feed value (determined by type of grass sward harvested), and preservation (determined by how well the harvesting and ensiling process was carried out).

In terms of quality for dairy cows in milk and growing heifers, dry matter digestibility (DMD) should be at least 72% (and 75% for freshly calved winter milk cows). Dry cows needing moderate BCS gain will need silage at 68-70%. National average DMD (based on the farms submitting samples) is around 66% DMD, so overall it is likely that most farms have silage stocks that are below target quality. How does your winter feed stock compare to target? The advice is to test silage pits and bales to find out. Discuss with your Teagasc advisor, who will also help with interpreting results.

Table 2: Main parameters for assessing grass silage quantity and quality.

Measure	Dry cows	Milking cows and young stock	Comment
Feed value metrics			
DMD (%)	68-70	74+	Key determinant of overall feed value.
UFL (energy) per kg	0.72-0.75	0.83-0.88	Higher UFL means more feed energy for milk solids and weight gain.
Crude protein (CP – %)	12	14+	Lower DMD and/or nitrogen (N) application reduces CP.
PDIE (g/kg – protein)	75+	80+	Determined by UFL and CP levels in silage.
Intake value (g/kg) LW 0.75	90-95	>105	Higher values indicate better intake potential.
Potassium (K) content	<2.2% for dry cows	>2.4% no issue for milking cows	High K silage fed from two weeks pre calving creates milk fever risk.
Preservation metrics		Comment	
Dry matter (%)	24-28%	Silage should be costed on a DM basis.	
pH	4.0-4.2 (4.4 for drier crops)	Too high pH indicates poor preservation, too low may affect intake.	
Ammonia	Less than 8% of N	High ammonia indicates poor preservation and reduces intake.	
Lactic acid	8-10% of DM	Higher values indicate a stable, palatable silage.	
Ash	<8% of DM	High ash indicates soil contamination.	

National Dairy Conference in Kilkenny

The Teagasc National Dairy Conference 2023 will take place on Wednesday November 29 in the Lyrath Hotel, Kilkenny. The theme of this year's conference is "Adapting to a changing dairy farming environment".

This year has been very challenging for dairy farmers in terms of stubbornly high costs, reduced milk revenues, labour availability and uncertainty regarding future compliance requirements. The dairy conference affords a

great opportunity to discuss and debate the issues with industry peers and fellow farmers. We look forward to a positive and engaging event in Kilkenny

The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine Charlie McConalogue TD will open the conference with a keynote address. The morning conference sessions will include an international perspective on factors affecting dairy production costs (David Beca, RedSky

consulting, Melbourne Australia), and an examination of current and future labour structures and efficiencies on Irish dairy farms (Marion Beecher, People in Dairy Project, Moorepark).

This year's conference will feature a range of practical workshops where attendees can meet

and interact with researchers, advisors and leading dairy farmers on a range of issues, such as grazing and N strategies, future farm stocking rate decisions, nutrient management technologies, and the potential benefits of flexible milking schedules. Please see www.teagasc.ie for booking details.

Fodder supplies stable but some shortage risk

The national fodder survey showed that 75% of farms surveyed have a surplus of winter feed in stock. The proportion of farms short of silage ranged from 9-15% depending on region, with the north west tighter for feed supply than average (**Table 3**). The survey also identified a cohort of 10-20% of farms (depending on region) that are at risk of being tight for winter feed, depending on the duration of winter. These data are consistent across enterprise type within region and tally. Other results from the survey showed that 16% of farms (predominantly drystock) had

fewer animals this year, and approximately 17% had less silage on hand compared to last year. Of the farms identified as being short or at risk of being short of feed, 53% intended to purchase silage, 25% intended to reduce stock, and 23% were planning a combination of both.

In summary, the national picture for winter feed availability is relatively secure, with a requirement for close monitoring on 10-20% of farms and corrective action needed on 10-15% of farms. Such farms are advised to act early to balance feed budgets.

Table 3: Winter feed balance by region and enterprise October 2023.

Region	Adequate or surplus silage ¹	Some risk/tight supply ²	Short
Midlands/north east	81%	10%	9%
North west	67%	18%	15%
South east	68%	20%	12%
South west	82%	10%	8%

1. Based on planned winter feed demand and current feed stocks.

2. At risk = supplies may be inadequate for an extended duration of winter.