Grassland Science Department

Title
Rearing dairy calves in the post-quota era

Abstract
The health and welfare of pre-weaned dairy calves is of paramount importance to the sustainability of the Irish dairy industry. Recent studies have shown that calf mortality rate on Irish dairy herds is 10.5% within the first 12 months of life, much higher than other European countries such as Norway (3.7%), suggesting that there is considerable scope for improvement. Inadequate nutrition, welfare and husbandry of young calves can predispose them to high levels of morbidity and mortality. This is of critical importance when aiming to get replacement heifers to target weight at mating start date. Additionally, a higher rate of mortality (+1.5%) in Irish dairy bull calves compared to heifers has been recorded. While calf size may be a contributing factor it is highly likely that bull mortality will increase further as the market for pre-weaned dairy bull calves is already limited and is likely to deteriorate further in the post-quota era. This may have repercussions on the health and welfare of these animals. This project will address these issues by i) investigating nutritional strategies for the pre-weaned calf post-colostrum feeding (including the development of a point of care IgG diagnostic prototype tool); ii) establishing the effect of scour and pneumonia on the mortality and morbidity of dairy calves on commercial Irish dairy herds; iii) creating an expert group to investigate the development of outlets for dairy bull calves.

Project Leader: Emer Kennedy

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