

# Drying off: feed quality and

John Leahy runs a spring-calving dairy herd on a heavy soils farm in Upper Athea, Co Limerick. He is part of the Teagasc/Kerry monitor farm programme.

**Keith Fahy, Teagasc, Newcastlewest, Co Limerick**

**J**ohn Leahy is milking 95 cows at a stocking rate of 2.41 on the grazing platform. In late October, he condition-scored all cows and heifers. The results determined which animals needed to be dried off first and also identified the cows that would need supplementation with silage during the first weeks of the dry period.

There are a number of major factors to consider when managing the dry cow:

1. Calving date
2. Body condition score
3. Lactation number
4. Silage quality
5. Grass in diet
6. Somatic cell count

## 1. Calving date

The dry-off date will vary depending on the condition score of the cow and the length the farmer wants to keep cows dry (e.g. six, eight or 10 weeks prior to calving). "We start calving on 10 February, with 50% of the herd due to calve by the first week in March," says John. "With all cows dried off by mid-December, the majority of cows will be dry for at least 10 weeks."

## 2. Body condition score (BCS)

Having the cow in the correct BCS is critical when drying off is key as it may have a serious effect on production and the health status of the cow at calving. Cows with a condition score of 2.5 or less will have been dried off along with the first calvers by mid-November. These receive ad-lib pit silage (from 2014 pit) supplemented with 1kg to 2kg of ration for approx. five weeks or until optimum condition score has been met.

Farmers planning on a eight-week dry period must have cows in BCS of 3+ on the day of drying off as cows can only put on weight/condition in 18 of the 42 days dry.

Cows that are have a BCS less than three and are milked, on average to poor quality silage, are at risk of serious problems in spring, e.g. fertility issues at breeding, poor calf and colostrum quality and greater pressures on cows 'milking off their backs'. This may cause milk fever post-calving which can affect yield further on in the lactation. Feeding thin cows ration earlier in the dry period is much more beneficial than prolonging feeding in later lactation as this may have a negative effect on calf size, creating calving difficulties.

## 3. Lactation number

Lactation number should play a major role when deciding to dry off. First-lactation cows should be dried off first. Milking first-lactation cows later into the year can reduce BCS and future production. "We'll dry off our 22 first calvers by mid-November along with thinner cows," says John Leahy. "Mature cows that are in good condition will be dried off by 15 December."

## 4. Silage quality

Forage quality will determine if meals need to be fed and the most accurate way to do this is to test the quality of the silage and supplement poorer silages. It is vital that cows



do not lose condition during the dry period due to poor quality silage being fed. Losing condition may affect production in 2016.

John's 2015 silage sample results are shown in Table 1. John was disappointed with his silage DMD quality this year. "We had planned on making silage in May but weather did not permit and this forced cutting into June," says John. "This had a big effect on silage quality. Pit silage is at best average and we'll take that into account when supplementing." Cows being milked off silage should be fed silage of greater than 70% DMD.

## 5. Grass in the diet

The main objective is to prolong the grazing season and get the highest amount of grass as possible in the diet without affecting spring covers or the BCS of the animal. "I plan to milk until mid-December and to have cows grazing for as long as possible," says John. Due to the heavy nature of the farm, it is almost impossible to set a precise date as to when cows will be permanently housed. This may range from early to late November. Good quality baled silage is expected to be introduced around 20 November. John had 70% of the farm grazed by 1 November. Last year's closing average farm cover was 450kg/ha, but this year when the AFC hits 550kg dm/ha this year the farm will be closed off.

### John Leahy's 2015 silage results

| Silage type   | Grass silage | Grass silage | Range   |
|---------------|--------------|--------------|---------|
| Date of cut   | 6 June 2015  | 20 July 2015 |         |
| Cut number    | First cut    | Second cut   |         |
| Silage system | Pit          | Round bale   |         |
| Dry matter    | 21.6         | 26.6%        | 15-55   |
| pH            | 4.3          | 4.3          | 3.5-5.0 |
| Ammonia       | 18           | 16.0         | 7-15    |
| Protein       | 8.6          | 11.8         | 7-16    |
| ME            | 10           | 10.4         | 9-12    |
| DMD           | 64%          | 66%          | 55-82   |
| FIM intake    | 86           | 92           | 70-115  |

# body condition are key



## Key messages

When drying off this year, it is vital that farmers address the following:

- Body condition score.
- Silage quality.
- Calving date.
- Give priority to first lactation cows.
- Group cows according to condition score.

### 6. Somatic cell count

John has good milk quality (<150,000 SCC) but still plans to identify cows that had a higher than average cell count and cows and that were treated for mastitis.

“These cows will be dried off earlier than the final drying off group. This allows cows to recover from mastitis and should help improve their cell count for the following spring,” he says.

### Conclusion

There are a number of farmers debating whether or not they will milk on later this year when compared with other years (due to the abolishment of quotas). This may increase production and generate a steady cashflow into the winter. However unless this is done correctly, it may prove to be a ‘penny wise pound foolish’ approach.

If farmers are planning to milk on into the autumn/winter, they must have cows in a BCS greater than three, when drying off with a eight-week dry period. If this target is not reached, there may be substantial negative effects in 2016. This could include health issues, metabolic disorders, calving difficulties, lower production and fertility issues. “Drying off is a key time which needs to be managed carefully,” concludes John.



0.5 of a BCS is approx. 25kg liveweight in a Holstein Friesian cow

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