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TIPS FOR SIX-WEEK CALVING

Achieving the target six-week calving rate of 90% is worth an extra 5c/litre or €279/cow extra profit compared with the national average calving spread

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Research at Teagasc Moorepark shows that there is an extra €8.22 profit per cow for each percentage point increase in the six-week calving rate. Of course, calving such a high proportion of the herd in a relatively short period creates a workload challenge.

But it is a predictable workload. Farms with a 90% six-week calving rate expect half the herd to calve in 16 to 18 days. For a 100-cow herd, this is about three calvings per day; for 300 cows it's an average of 10 births/day. The number of calvings can spike in any day. It won't be spread evenly over the period, so you must be prepared for this too.

1 Facilities: ensure that you have adequate space

- A 100-cow herd with 50 calving in 17 days will need 10 calving spaces.
- Allow at least 2.3m² per calf in the shed.
- Consider turnout to grass after three weeks to lower calf density in sheds.
- Arrange sheds so that they can be mechanically cleaned out and bedding is easily accessible.
- Ventilation and drainage must be

- adequate in calf sheds.
- Have adequate feed space for feeding thin cows.
- Prepare all facilities and purchase all equipment in advance.
- Have fresh foot dips in place.
- All routine maintenance, fences, water, etc, should be done in January.

2 Calve cows in the correct body condition

- Calve cows in good body condition (score 3.25) to reduce calving difficulty and the possible need for assistance.
- Feed according to silage quality on farm.
- Use an appropriate dry cow mineral.
- Vaccinate for diseases diagnosed (use bulk milk screening as a guide).
- Use easy-calving bulls, especially on heifers.
- Watch that late calving cows do not become over-conditioned.
- Train heifers to the parlour in advance. Allow them free access from the collecting yard into parlour. Include at least one cow who knows the route with the heifers.

3 Farm system – keep it simple

- Get cow to grass immediately.
- Sell bull calves as soon as possible,



Motorised movement of milk from the parlour to the calf house.



- rear only replacement heifers.
- Limit the breeding season to less than 13 weeks.
- Turn calves out to grass early.
- Have a separate colostrum group initially. This means that the main herd can be milked without issues, and allows time with the colostrum group to work on any problems this group has.
- Consider contract rearing of heifers, or even replacement calf-rearing.

4 Organisation – have a structure to the working day

- Have basic instruction/operating procedures written and visible.
- Decide who is going to do what, in advance, e.g. slurry, fertiliser, calf-rearing, milking, paperwork, tagging, etc.
- Have a definite, early, start to evening milking, e.g. 4pm and a finish time, e.g. 6pm. After this, there should only be calving supervision.
- Cow and calf movement can eat into time. Most yards are a combination of buildings constructed over time. Can they be modified to reduce cow/calf movement in spring?
- Simplify the movement of milk e.g. pump, quad, etc.
- Minimise the movement of calves from shed to shed.

Farmer profile

Bryan and Gail Daniels, Co Kilkenny



Consider early turnout of calves in spring and once-a-day feeding.

Bryan and Gail Daniels farm at Kilmoganny, Co Kilkenny. In 2016, they will have 267 cows to calf with a predicted six-week calving rate of 92%. Bryan spoke at the Teagasc national dairy conference in December and outlined their approach to the workload challenge with compact calving.

"We have four people working on the farm in spring," says Bryan; "myself, Gail, a full-time student and a student for three months. Communication is very important during this period; everyone must know their role."

All four have a walkie-talkie due to poor mobile coverage in the area. "We all have breakfast in the house at 10am. This is like a daily meeting in addition to getting a good meal after the morning work. We also have notice boards in the kitchen, calving area and dairy."

Preparation, according to Bryan, is crucial. There is an eight-week dry period where families spend time together and people recharge their batteries. All facilities are cleaned and prepared in advance. A list of supplies required is created by Christmas. This shopping list is purchased in bulk in January. All cow passages are numbered and there is a paddock map to avoid any confusion when busy. Paperwork is up to date in advance and each day after breakfast Bryan goes to the office to complete new paperwork. This can take from five to 60 minutes depending on the day.

"We have simplified cow and calf flow," says Bryan. "Two years ago, we relocated the calving area to the middle of the yard. This involved removing old cubicles from a section of a shed and creating a loose calving area for 38 cows. This calving area is convenient to the parlour and to the calf house and minimises movement of stock at calving. After calving, calves are moved in the morning or evening to the nursery (individual pens). They spend one to two days there; heifers move to the new heifer shed, bull calves to older sheds."

Compact-calving herds must be based on a simple system. The Daniels sell bulls as soon as possible and only farm cows and replacements. Cows go to grass by day immediately after calving.

"The fields are 700ft and 1,000ft above sea level, so grass growth is low in February and as a result cows go to grass day and night in March," says Bryan.

Gail is the calf-rearer on the farm. Milk is transported by motorised tanker from the parlour to calf-rearing shed. The heifer shed is a purpose-built six-bay shed with accommodation for about 12 calves per bay.

Bryan emphasises the importance of looking after yourself. "I will get a health check-up in January and it's also vital to eat well and get adequate sleep in the busy February and March period."

5 Practices, proven by research, to reduce workload

- Consider once-a-day (OAD) milking of cows for a few weeks in spring.
- Practice OAD feeding of calves once they are over three weeks.
- Early turnout of calves to grass. Teagasc Moorepark trials show similar performance to calves reared indoors.
- Night feeding of silage can reduce the proportion of cows calving from 11pm to 6am.

6 People management

- Take stock, in advance, of how many people will be on the farm in February/March, e.g. yourself, family, employee, casual labour, contractors, relief milker, etc.
- Decide on each person's role and ensure that you make best use of their skills during this period.
- Prepare a roster where necessary.
- Do they need any training/introduction? If so, it needs to be done in January.
- Make sure that they understand your farming system and how all tasks fit into that system.



The Daniels' heifer-rearing shed.