

dairying

10 TIPS TO MANAGE WORKLOAD

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This Limerick family work hard, but smart, constantly seeking ways to get quality work done in the most efficient and cost-effective way possible.

The Hannon family are dairy farming at Kiltiplan on the border of Patrickswell and Ballybrown parish, seven miles west of Limerick city. Cow numbers on this picturesque farm located close to Adare remained static at 145 for the five-year period between 2010 and 2014. However, numbers have taken a considerable jump in the past three years and there are now 200 cows in the herd.

John, Catherine and their four children; Fiona, 19, Mairéad, 17, Shane 15, and Tadhg, 13, all have key roles in the day-to-day running of the family farm. Even allowing for the enormous labour input contributed by the Hannon family, managing a 200-strong herd is no easy task.

“Labour is like concrete work, you have to order a bit extra to ensure the job is done right,” is the way John describes it. It is clear to see from the way this farm is run that any job that can be done by an outside provider is delegated out. If there is an easier way to carry out some task, then the facilities/equipment will be put in place on the farm to make this happen. Below are 10 ways in which the Hannon family are managing the workload on their farm:



Family labour

1 It is a case of all hands on deck on this farm. All four children milk cows regularly, and impressively, each of them can expertly stomach-tube a calf. When I last spoke with John, he informed me that he had returned from a meeting at 10.30pm the night before to find Fiona and Mairead drafting cows into the calving pen. John headed to bed and left the two girls at it. This is a situation many farmers throughout the country would be envious of.

Farm Relief service

2 The Hannon family make great use of the local Farm Relief Service. For example, during the breeding season, the FRS will milk the

cows one morning per week while John tail-paints the cows. Last winter, the FRS brought in a rollover crate, while John teat-sealed his in-calf heifers. This spring, FRS staff clipped all of the cows' tails in a few hours.

Other tasks carried out by the FRS include hoof-paring, calf dehorning, freeze branding and relief milking, all of which allows more time for John to focus on stock and grassland management.

Contractor

3 Any job that can be contracted out on this farm will be. All the obvious jobs such as silage-making, slurry spreading and hedgecutting are outsourced. Fertiliser spreading, spreading of soiled water, AI and fencing are also outsourced, leaving



Shane, Mairéad, Catherine, John, Tadhg and Fiona.

John with very little tractor work.

There is no topping carried out on the farm. Fields are grazed tightly or else a cut of round bales of silage are taken to clean up paddocks. A good maintenance man is another key member of John's team. All welding and other repair work is also contracted out. The absence of machinery is noticeable, which in turn cuts down on time (and money) spent repairing tractors and equipment.

Calf feeding

4 Calf feeding is one of the major consumers of time on dairy farms in springtime. Again, the Hannons have fine-tuned this area and only spend the minimum time necessary tending to calves, without compromising on calf welfare. All

calves are fed once a day from four weeks of age. At around the same time, they are moved outdoors to a sheltered paddock, reducing the time spent cleaning out calf houses.

A 50-teat calf feeder on the back of the quad is used to feed the outdoor calves, while a milk trolley is used indoors.

John points out that even in autumn he will put the 50 teat feeder on the quad when he needs to move the calves from one paddock to another. All calf houses can be cleaned mechanically with the loader.

Machinery/equipment

5 While the farm is not overburdened with machinery, there are some key machines which are

helping to reduce the labour requirement. John bought an industrial loader some years ago (for a quarter of the price of tractor) for feeding silage, among other jobs.

The quad is probably the most used piece of equipment on this farm and then there is John's favourite, the pallet fork. It might seem the obvious labour-saving device, but John uses it to great effect for chores such as covering and opening the silage pit. He loads all sand bags on to a pallet at the opening of the silage pit and then picks up pallets again when covering the pit in the summertime.

The fork is also used for moving tyres, pallets of fertiliser or moving milk for calves. Most of the tractor rear-mounted equipment can be attached and detached from the tractor seat quickly and safely with A-frames.



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John Hannon and Teagasc advisor Joe Kelleher.

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Facilities

6 Facilities are excellent on the farm. Cow numbers have expanded on many farms since the removal of quotas, but in most instances facilities have not increased accordingly. Not so, on this farm. There has been significant investment in calving pens, calf housing, cubicles, slurry storage, paddock sizes, water troughs, roadways, etc.

The drafting system is very effective and the backing gate in the collecting yard ensures a steady flow of cows into the parlour at milking time. Last autumn, converting several older buildings resulted in all calving pens being capable of being cleaned with the loader.

Increased slurry storage means that all soiled water can now be spread by contractor using the umbilical system.

Once-a-day milking

7 Cows on this farm are milked once a day in February every year, a practice that has been in operation for five years now. Throughout the entire calving season, all colostrum cows are milked OAD for five days after calving, until their milk is ready to enter the tank.

Thirteen milkings per week

8 Cows are milking only once on a Sunday from early autumn, freeing up Sunday evenings for family time. Cows are milked at the usual time on a Sunday morning and on the Sunday evening they are just moved to a fresh paddock to settle them.

Night feeding of silage

9 There is a dedicated house on the farm for cows nearing calving, which is fitted with locking barriers.

Silage is fed to all cows in the middle of the day, but the locking barriers remain closed in the calving house until about 10pm. As a result, very few cows calve at night

There is nobody on night calving duty and the system is working well for the Hannons. It should also be pointed out that only easy calving sires are used.

Bulk buying inputs

10 The Hannons are excellent at planning ahead. All inputs are forward-purchased and usually in bulk. There is no need to pop down to the local co-op for a gallon of detergent to wash the

parlour because it was bought in bulk before the first cow calved. It is a similar story for fertiliser. John tries to stay off the road as much as possible.

John works full-time on the farm and when you take family labour (excluding John), casual labour and student labour into account, he believes there is the equivalent of another full-time labour unit. But what is not as obvious, is that there is easily another labour unit being accounted for through work that is either outsourced or being reduced through labour-saving techniques.

The Hannons are always on the lookout for ways of making life easier. A lot of thought and effort has been put into labour-saving by the Hannons, much of it has been done cost effectively by using and adapting what they already had in the yard.

Busy

“Dairy farming is demanding on mind and body,” says John, “Especially in springtime, and we’re always on the lookout for ways to further reduce the work load on their farm. It takes time and effort to include labour saving in your routine because you are often too busy.”

Isn’t it time farmers, whatever their enterprises, all paused to look at how they do things and try and make life easier for ourselves? The Hannonns are showing the way.