

## Teagasc Notes for week ended Friday March 8<sup>th</sup>

### DAIRY

#### March is crunch time for calf health

Mid March to early April is the highest risk time for calf health problems. Numbers of young calves on the farm are usually at peak, putting facilities and work time under pressure. Now is a good time to review management and hygiene around calf rearing on your farm.

- Make sure calves have at least 1.8m<sup>2</sup> floor area and 10m<sup>3</sup> of air space per head. Measure if you are not sure. Having correct space per calf reduces disease risk. Maintain clean bedding.
- Avoid adding extra calves to settled pens if short on space. Provide some extra area (e.g., hutches, new shed area) or better still get some early-born calves to grass.
- As calving slows down, do not mix younger and older calves in the same space. Pens must be cleaned and disinfected and allowed to dry before introducing a second crop of calves.
- Keep registrations up to date and move out calves that are to be sold as soon as possible. Are later-born calves getting enough colostrum? Doublecheck that standards are being met as well as at the start of calving. Clean and disinfect dump buckets, calf-feeding bottles and other equipment; these tend to accumulate dirt over the busy period.
- As the season moves on, dirty calving pens become a major source for cryptosporidium scour infection for newborn calves. Clean and disinfect, or move to a new calving area. Sick calves mean more work, more stress, poorer welfare and lower lifetime performance. A few checks in mid March can make a big difference to the health of the calf crop.

### BEEF

#### Health Issues

- Freshly-calved cows will need to be supplemented with magnesium after turnout to grass. The biggest risks are posed when conditions are cold and wet, when grass in a paddock is getting tight. Grass that is growing fast and got well fertilised with potassium (K) poses a greater risk with low magnesium.
- Young calves that are turned out should be checked at least twice a day in March and April for signs of joint ill, scour and pneumonia. Early detection and treatment of any of these conditions increase the chances of a successful outcome.
- Many stock bulls will be called into action again in April and May. Are they in good, fit condition? Do they need to get their feet pared? If so, organise to get them done three to four weeks before it is needed. If you have bought a new young stock bull, has he been fertility tested?
- If you vaccinate your cows against BVD or leptospirosis, their booster shot should be given at least one month before the breeding season commences. Heifers being kept for breeding will need a two-shot programme three-to-six weeks apart. BVD and leptospirosis vaccines can be given at the same time.
- Calves should be covered with their first shot of the 10-in-1 clostridial vaccine to prevent blackleg and covered with the booster shot one month later. Make sure all your calves are tissue tag tested for BVD. If you happen to identify a persistently-infected calf, and it is a confirmed case after a retest, then do yourself and your neighbours a huge favour and have it put down!

#### Purchased calves – where not to save money

The following four areas are where you should not be trying to save money if you have bought in young calves for rearing:

- Straw bedding: young calves have to be bedded in huge amounts of clean dry straw. This keeps them warm as they nest in the straw creating their own mini-microclimate while at the same time it keeps them away from any dung and urine in the shed. You should not be able to see the calf's legs when it is lying down.
- Vaccines: any farm that has begun a vaccination programme with their calves will never go back to taking the risk of not having one and hoping for the best. Pneumonia is one of the biggest killers of young calves and it is hard to avoid without vaccinating. Speak to your vet about what is the most suitable programme for your calves.
- Milk replacer: the less milk replacer you feed the lower the weight your calves will be next autumn when you are housing them. Most of this lost weight gain will never be recovered. Feed 650-750g of milk replacer per head per day. In other words a 20kg bag of milk replacer should feed no more than 25-30 calves per day.
- Calf crunch: start feeding this from day one and do not restrict it. This promotes the development of the calf's rumen so that it can be weaned off milk replacer at an early age. Buy a high-quality calf crunch that is palatable. Calves can be weaned once they are eating over 1.0kg per day for three consecutive days.

## **SHEEP**

### Grazing Management

Target a pre-grazing cover of 1,000-1,200kg DM/ha (7-8cm) grazing down to a residual of 3.5cm in March and early April. It's important particularly towards the latter half of this month to ensure that pasture is grazed out correctly, in order to ensure the sward is set up for subsequent grazings. It is vital for flocks, particularly those lambed in late February/early March, to continue to group up ewes into larger grazing groups as the month progresses. This will enable establishing a grazing rotation and help improve performance by reducing the residency period in individual fields. Moving grazing groups on faster will also allow for faster regrowth and increase overall grass production and utilisation.