

Labour Efficiency and Spring Workload

Edition 1

Spring Management Series 2023



Farmer Focus



John & Sylvia Powell
Boherboy, Birr, Co. Offaly

Farm Profile

Calving start date: 1st February

% of herd calved: 15%

Spring Labour: John & Sylvia, relief milkers, relief labour



Sylvia and John currently milk 240 cows in Boherboy, Birr, Co. Offaly. Their aim is to make work as easy and labour-efficient as possible for themselves but also for any help they have on farm. They have invested in mechanising many jobs around the yard to help make work as simple as possible.

Calving

Cows are calved in group pens; these are next to the cubicle house. Cows are moved into the group pen as they come close to calving. The cows are checked in the morning while cubicles are being cleaned and any cow close to calving is marked and then moved out to the group pen. There is a whiteboard in the calving shed for any notes and an area for tags, calving jack, etc.

Cows are also marked with yellow when they are vaccinated with Rotovac. Cows are not all vaccinated at the same time. Instead they are done around calving date. The 6-week calving rate is 86%.

Calves

Once calves are born and have been licked, they are removed from the mother and fed colostrum - each calf will be given 3 litres. The colostrum is tested using a refractometer.

Any calves born at night get a collar put on with a number and the number and calf details are put on a whiteboard in the calf shed. This stops any confusion until the calf is tagged the next day. The collars are also used for calves which may be sick or slow to drink, so they can be easily monitored and spotted in the shed. Calves are grouped in pens of 10 and fed on teat feeders. Calves are fed whole milk.



Farmer Focus (Continued)

John and Sylvia have a tank and pump on the back of the quad so there is no lifting buckets and calves are quickly fed.

The calves are bedded regularly. Sylvia and John invested in a bedding machine which chops and spreads the straw. This greatly speeds up the process and it's also used for bedding the calving pens.

Milking

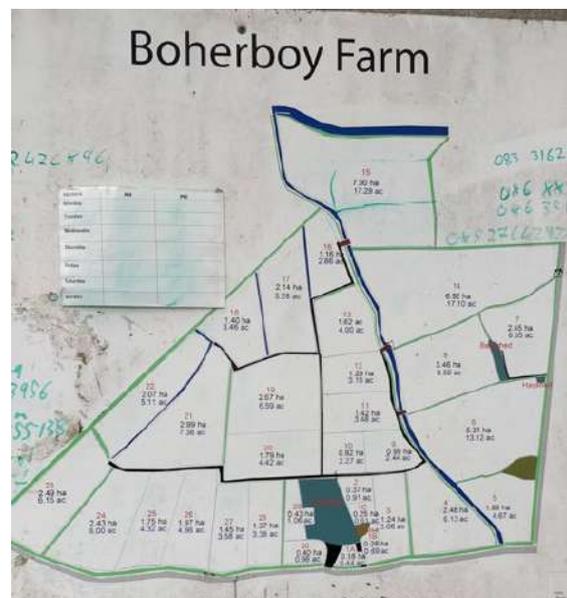
John and Sylvia have a 30-unit Bomatic. There are always two people milking. There is a backing gate in the collecting yard and a drafter put in so there's no need to leave the pit while milking. When cows calve, they're kept in a separate, fresh group for eight milkings. Cows are CMT before going to the bulk tank.

Contractor use

John and Sylvia use the contractor for slurry in the spring and any zero grazing they might do. This frees up time for other work. They have a farm map with paddocks numbered so it's easy to give direction to contractors coming in.

Organisation

There are standard operating procedures and guides in the office for anyone on the farm along with key phone numbers to call. This allows work to carry-on without John and Sylvia. This is important as a lot of the relief labour they have doesn't have farming experience, so it's important that everything is easily understood. They both also have a shared calendar in the office - any time off, activities or events are marked so everyone knows what is happening on the farm.



Being best prepared for Spring should currently be the main consideration on most dairy farms. Spring brings an increased workload, with difficult weather, cows calving and starting the grazing season.

Some farms manage this period more efficiently than others through prior preparation and use of labour saving management techniques to make best use of time. Here are some tips on being best prepared while increasing labour efficiency on your farm this Spring.



Organisation

- ▶ Have a definite finish time to the working day e.g., 6pm, so that after this time only calving supervision takes place.
- ▶ Decide who's going to do what in advance and prepare a roster where multiple people are involved.
- ▶ Have standard operating procedures (SOP), or step by step instructions, written and visible for all key tasks.
- ▶ Ensure all supplies / equipment required for calving are on hand and are convenient to the calving shed.

Facilities

In compact Spring calving herds up to 50% of cows can calve in 15-16 days. Adequate calving and calf space will greatly reduce the workload involved.

- ▶ Feeding and cleaning of calving areas should be done mechanically.
- ▶ Measure the available lying area in your calf shed – calves need a minimum of 1.7m² lying space. If short look at:
 - Using existing sheds that can be modified.
 - Calf hutches – quick to install and flexible.
 - Planning and arranging for early sale of surplus calves.
 - Contract rearing replacement calves.
- ▶ Efficient transportation of milk to the calf shed reduces time spent feeding calves – a milk kart helps greatly (see example overleaf).
- ▶ Ensure the calving area and calf shed are kept clean and disinfected. Use plenty of straw.
- ▶ **Think Hygiene, Hygiene, Hygiene!**



Grazing

- ▶ Complete a grass walk and set up your grassland plan in advance. What paddocks will be grazed first? How will paddocks be accessed? Can you increase the number of paddock entrances?
- ▶ Have plenty of reels and posts on hand and plan to allocate grass a number of days in advance.
- ▶ Decide on your Spring fertiliser plan. Ensure fertiliser is bought and in the yard.
- ▶ Buy yourself some time - book your local contractor for slurry and fertiliser applications.

Milking Routine

- ▶ Evening milking time has been proven to dictate the finish time on dairy farms - therefore start milking earlier (3.30 pm – 4.00 pm). Research has shown no adverse effects to yield or milk quality while implementing a 16:8 hr milking interval.
- ▶ Milking a fresh group of cows separate to the main herd makes the milking routine easier.
- ▶ Develop a clear marking system of identifying the fresh antibiotic cows.
- ▶ Train your heifers to the parlour prior to the commencement of calving.
- ▶ Develop a colostrum management plan.
- ▶ Once-A-Day milking for the month of February is an option to free up time during peak calving.



Joint Development Programme

Lakeland Dairies/Teagasc Joint Development Programme has produced this Spring Management Series. Our advisors are currently available by phone to discuss all farm related matters.

- ▶ Susan Casey 087 099 5359
- ▶ Owen McPartland 087 330 2254
- ▶ Michael Monahan 087 188 3803