

Labour Efficiency and Spring Workload

Edition 1

Spring Management Series 2024



Farmer Focus



Owen Brodie
Ryefield House, Virginia, Co. Cavan

Farm Profile

Calving start date: 5th February 2024

% of herd calved: 45%

Spring Labour: Owen, one full time worker, one student from Ballyhaise and family members at weekends and holidays.

Owen currently milks around 200 cows in Virginia Co. Cavan. His aim is to run the farm efficiently, making life as simple as possible not only for himself but also his staff. Owen is continuously making improvements on the farm and investing modern equipment to make the work load simpler.

Calving

Dry cows are checked regularly throughout the day to identify ones close to calving. Once they are identified they are marked. That evening all the cows that are marked are moved to one of three calving pens. The calving pens are located close to the cubicles, so it is easy to move them. The calving shed contains a straw area and a concreted area for the cows to eat. The calving pens can comfortably fit 50 cows but at peak calving times can cater for up to 80 cows.



Owen Brodie with his staff Ryan, Tom and Brian.

The six week calving rate is 88-90%. Cow collars help identify when cows start cycling and save tail painting.

Calves

Once calves are born they are fed colostrum. The colostrum is fed within two hours of birth. Each calf will receive 3-4 Litres. They are then tagged. The calving pens are emptied once a day and calf's are placed in calf shed. They tend to be left with the cow for an average of 12 hours. Fresh colostrum is left in the dairy which makes it easy for calves to bed fed day or night. This saves the calf going beyond the recommended time without colostrum and reduces labour.

Calves are grouped in pens. Owen tends to keep bull calves separate to heifers. Bull calves are placed into groups and fed on a teat feeder.



Farmer Focus (Continued)

Owen has invested in automatic calf feeders. The heifers are trained onto automatic calf feeders once they reach five days of age. The bull calves receive whole milk. They are kept on until six weeks of age. The automatic calf feeder has significantly reduced labour not only by having to feed them twice a day but also treating calves. In previous years calves have become sick with pneumonia. But with the calf feeder sick calves are easily identified and treated.

The calves are bedded regularly. Owen and his team decided to bed the calf shed this year pre calving when the farm was quiet. This saved time and added work when the cows started calving.

Milking

Owen has a 24-unit direct line, herringbone, Dairy Master Parlour. There is a 15,000L bulk tank. The parlour was only put in last year. There is two people milking in the springtime but only one person is needed during the rest of the year. Currently cows are only being milked once a day. Milking twice a day will commence in one week. Fresh cows and cows with mastitis are milked at the end of milking. Fresh cows are CMT before being put into the bulk tank. To improve labour efficiency in the parlour he hopes to invest in a three-way drafting gate and an auto wash for his new parlour.

Contractor use

Owen uses contractors to pipe slurry in the spring. This allows him and his staff to focus on other tasks in the spring. There is no zero grazing as the location of the silage ground is 12Km away.

Organisation

Generally, there is a defined start and finish time for all staff on the farm. Owen aims for all jobs to be done by 6pm on the farm. During the springtime staff start at 8am for the morning milking. When the cows are milked twice a day, one staff member comes in early to do the morning milking and then can go home early in the evening. The staff member that comes in later stays on in the evening for evening milking.



New parlour

Grazing and feed

Cows are currently out for a few hours each day. The weather dictates how long they are out for. The cows have been grazing since they first calved. It is hoped the cows will get longer days out as the spring progresses. Owen aims to have 20% of the farm grazed out by the end of February and 70% by the end of calving. The average cover is 850kg DM/ha. The workload is reduced on farm as a result of cows being turned out early.



Cal ID	Sex	Breed Group	Day	Drink
403	1	Dairy	10	✓
345	2	Dairy	6	✗
425	2	Dairy	6	✓
430	2	Dairy	5	✓
428	2	Dairy	5	✓
424	2	Dairy	6	✓
400	3	Dairy	10	✓
404	4	Dairy	10	✓
401	4	Dairy	12	✓
406	1	Dairy	10	✓
402	1	Dairy	10	✗

Calf feeder screen highlighting calf that didn't drink



Welcome to our Spring Management Series of advice, tips and information to help you get the best from your dairy enterprise over the Spring period and onwards. Each week, over twelve weeks, we'll update you across three main themes: Labour Efficiency & Spring Workload, Animal Health & Milk Quality and Spring Grassland Management.

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.
- ▶ Complete any outstanding paper work well in advance of calving start date.

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.

- ▶ Allow 10m² per cow in group calving pens (3 standard bays is adequate for 7 cows). Identify what other sheds are available on the farm where current calving space is inadequate. Look to set up a temporary group pen for the first 3-4 weeks of calving.
- ▶ 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.

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- ▶ Owen McPartland 087 330 2254
- ▶ Nicholas McKenna 087 353 3906