

Labour Efficiency and Spring Workload

Edition 2



Joint Development Programme



Spring Management Series 2025



Farmer Focus



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I recently came home after working in marketing for 10 years to farm alongside my parents, Kevin and Margaret, in Dunderry, Co Meath and my husband Andrew, in Darver, Co Louth. Between the two farms, we are milking 150 autumn-calving cows and 400 spring-calving cows.

Calving is going well, we aim to achieve 80% of the herd calved in the first 6 weeks and cows out to grass as soon as weather permits.

Calves

Once calves are born they are fed 3 litres colostrum within two hours of birth. They are then tagged and moved to the calf shed. Calves are then grouped in batches of 10 per pen, depending on weight and gender. The calves have access to fresh water and meal from birth, roughage is available in half barrels and the pens are bedded daily with light bedding. At the entrance to the calving shed, there is a disinfection point and brush to ensure biosecurity is kept to the highest standard. Calf drinkers are deep cleaned once a week with peracetic acid to ensure no build-up or residue of milk.

Dry cows

In early December a mineral analysis is done on the silage, from this we create a dry cow diet with our nutritionist. 4th lactation and older cows receive a calcium bolus after calving as a preventive measure with milk fever.

Contractor

We use a local contractor to pipe slurry, spreading 2,500 gallons an acre with a trailing shoe, this reduces the workload of staff and frees them up for other jobs.



Fertiliser Plan

We soil-sampled the farm last year and will apply the appropriate fertiliser according to the results of the samples taken. Our main aim is to reduce nitrogen use while increasing grass yields, we have incorporated clover into existing swards and reseeded ground. We also measure grass on a weekly basis. This way we can plan for the coming weeks to ensure grass is kept in the diet as much as possible. We can also see what paddocks need to be reseeded if there not growing enough in the year.

Organisation

We communicate through a farm WhatsApp group chat, so everyone knows what is going on, especially for weekend staff who weren't working during the week.

I recently completed a time management course with Lakeland Dairies and Nollaig Heffernan and found it very beneficial and have implemented practices on both farms. Some of the things include making a list of jobs to be done for the week, prioritising important jobs and ticking them off as they are completed, as well as planning a calendar for the year. With time being such a valuable commodity, some of these small changes have meant we are spending less time on menial tasks and more time to concentrate on the cows.

Purchasing time with your local contractor

Time consuming jobs, that are easily delegated to a contractor

- ▶ Slurry: Mixing and spreading slurry on the milking platform and silage ground.
- ▶ Fertiliser: Application of first round of urea and silage ground fertiliser.
- ▶ Forage transportation: Drawing home silage bales or pit silage from the out-farm.

Benefits of using Agri contractors

- ▶ Nitrogen efficiency - contractors help farmers get more slurry out in spring and with the use of Low Emission Slurry Spreading methods (LESS), getting more nitrogen from the slurry.
- ▶ Avoids the need to hire extra staff and investing in expensive machinery.
- ▶ Increased capacity ensures good value for money.
- ▶ Tax-deductible expense.

How to build up a good relationship with your local contractor

1. Notice: Allows the contractor to be efficient in his operation. Getting the job completed at the best time for farmer and contractor.
2. Farm maps: Simple farm maps will help give clear instructions and help communication.
3. Consistency of work and prompt payment will ensure a trustworthy service.



Calf Care

Calf husbandry takes up 25% of the labour requirement on dairy farms in spring. This can vary from farm to farm depending on facilities and calf rearing practices. The most efficient farms have simple systems and methods to reduce labour input in the calf shed. These are outlined below:

Table 1 Teagasc

Effect of calving rate and age at sale on peak calf numbers for a 100 cow herd			
6 week calving rate	Age at sale of beef calves	Peak Calves	Space required (m ²)
70%	2 weeks	47	80m ²
70%	4-5 weeks	70	119m ²
85%	2 weeks	50	85m ²
85%	6 weeks	85	145m ²

1. Milk transport and preparation

Suitable ways to move milk around the farm, e.g. using milk karts, play an important part in reducing manual strain. Time efficient farmers have workstations. These areas contain all the essentials to mix milk replacer, tagging equipment etc.

2. Once-a-day milk feeding

OAD feeding is a practice that can greatly reduce the labour required during the rearing period. Research conducted by Teagasc has shown no difference in the level of performance achieved by calves on OAD or TAD (twice a day) feeding. **It is important to wait until 28 days to commence OAD milk feeding.**



Reduce your milking interval

Milking interval ultimately dictates your finishing times, labour efficiency and total hours worked on the farm.

Many of the best Lakeland Dairies herds are operating a 16-8hr or a 15-9hr milking interval. Milking should take place between 3-4 pm in the afternoon. Reducing your milking interval should be practiced this spring. Later milking times of 5pm or after, often lead to poor use of time prior to starting to milk. Unessential jobs are carried out while waiting to milk.

A 16-8hr milking interval has shown no negative effects on SCC or milk yield, which is backed up by Teagasc research and Lakeland Dairies top farmers.



Other benefits include:

1. Better Lifestyle: Main farming tasks are completed at 6pm or before.
2. Happier staff: The retention of staff is much easier with a fixed early milking time.
3. Succession: Dairy farming is portrayed as a positive career choice for the next generation.
4. Milking interval describes only 1% of yield variation but 25% of work efficiency.

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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