

Managing labour on Shinagh Dairy Farm

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Background

Shinagh Dairy Farm was established up in 2011 by the four West Cork Co-ops, Bandon, Barryroe, Drinagh and Lisavaird in conjunction with Teagasc and Carbery. The company is leasing 78 adj. hectares of land from Shinagh Estates Ltd. and has just completed its seventh year of a 15 year project. The herd is almost fully crossbred at this stage. The original herd of 200 in-calf heifers comprised of 50% Black & White, 25% Jersey cross and 25% Norwegian Red cross heifers. A further 40 crossbred heifers were bought in 2011 as replacements for the following spring. Every heifer born on the farm since its establishment is crossbred. The only straight bred animals on the farm are some of the original cows that calved for the first time in 2011.

Our farm is run with one full time employee (myself) and casual labour hired for busy periods and to cover time off. All machinery work is done by contractors. This allows me to concentrate on the animals to achieve all the important targets to make this a profitable business.

Farm team

I am the only full time employee on the farm. We hire a student from our local Agricultural College or a student from the CIT agricultural course for the spring time. The student starts in February and stays for a 12 or 15 week placement depending on which course they are doing. We also employ local part time help, usually local farmers' sons or daughters, who are happy to do part time work.

Busy periods

With busy periods in year a lot of hours are put in on the first half of the year.

Month	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
Hours worked	124	796	844	480	381	267	275	275	267	275	215	124
% total hours	3%	18%	20%	11%	9%	6%	6%	6%	6%	6%	5%	5%
Total hours worked : 4,322												
Av. cows : 230												
Hours worked per cow : 19												

Busy calving period

Spring time is the busiest period on the farm. We have achieved a high 6 week calving rate over the last number of years and need extra help just to get through it. In addition to myself and the student, relief workers are employed at this time.

We operate a 12 day on, 2 day off work rota during calving season. This starts on a Monday with myself and the student working for 12 days. The relief help comes in on weekends to cover time off. The relief help we've employed are past students who know the system we operate on the farm. We are proud that we have a good relationship with past students and they are happy to come back and continue working with us.

For the first three weeks of the calving season, we have someone on the farm 24 hours a day and operate an every third or fourth night calving shift. For this service, we pay a set nightly rate this is not based on hours worked. Night duties consist of feeding and tagging calves and moving newborns to calf houses. We have a supply of colostrum ready for feeding during the night. Close up cows are moved into the straw bedded calving shed approximately 5 days before calving. This happens in the morning time to eliminate the need to move cows during the night.

Every morning, freshly calved cows are moved into the colostrum group of cows and remain in that group until their milk is suitable for the bulk tank. We run the cows in two separate groups during the spring. Once cow's milk is suitable for the bulk tank, they join the "main group" which go to grass while the "colostrum group" remain inside until their milk is suitable for sale. The colostrum group are milked once a day, and are brought to the parlour every morning and milked after the main group. Our rule is that these cows cannot enter the parlour until the pipe is out of the tank. This reduces the chance of antibiotic milk entering the tank.

We run two separate calf sheds, the H shed and the B shed. All heifer calves which are being kept as herd replacements enter the H shed. All other calves are put into the B shed. These are both bull calves and surplus heifer calves. A calf buyer comes to the farm at least once a week to buy all our bull calves so we don't need to take calves to the mart during this busy period. To reduce the risk of an outbreak of calf scour, nobody is allowed to enter the calf houses during the spring except our farm staff and the calf buyer who is well disinfected beforehand. Even the vet isn't allowed in the calf houses – calves in need of veterinary attention are taken out of the shed to the vet.

Calf rearing

Calves are fed the first feed of colostrum by nipple if possible. If they fail to finish colostrum by nipple or refuse to suck, they will be tubed. Once calves have received colostrum, they are moved to the calf houses and put into pens of 6 and fed on a milk bar feeder. Heifer calves are fed milk powder from the fourth feed; they are fed

in the morning while cows are being taken to the parlour. Bull calves are fed whole milk from the colostrum group after morning milking; milk for the evening feed is also collected at morning milking. All calves are fed again before evening milking. Heifer calves are put on once a day feeding at four weeks of age; they are fed after morning milking.

Busy breeding period

The next busy period for us is the breeding season. As we have grown in confidence with the fertility of the herd over the years, we don't carry out any pre-breeding heat detection. We condition score (BCS) the whole herd at the end of March. Cows of BCS <2.75 and cows calving after 1st April (regardless of BCS) are put on once a day milking (OAD) and remain on it until they are bred. We continue to monitor condition score between the end of March and breeding and may put more cows on OAD if necessary.

Heat detection is for me the most important job in the month of May. We heat detect at least 5 times a day during the first three weeks of the breeding season:

- 20 minutes before cows leave the paddock in the morning;
- 20 minutes after breakfast;
- 20 minutes at lunch time;
- 20 minutes before cows leave the paddock before evening milking;
- 20 minutes while locking in the cows after evening milking.

Two people work in the parlour during the first three weeks of the breeding season to keep tail paint topped up and to draft cows for AI. A technician is employed to AI the herd. For the second three weeks of the breeding season, we introduce three vasectomised bulls to assist us with detection. We still observe the cows as often. For the remaining 6 weeks of the breeding season, we rotate five stock bulls with the herd.

Milking routine

We have a 20 unit parlour. At various times of the year we have two people milking:

- Feb-March. Two people milking. We strip every cow at every milking during this period as early detection of mastitis aids recovery.
- April-early May. One person will milk and only strip cows at morning milking.
- First three weeks of the breeding season. Two people in the parlour for morning milking. This is for tail painting and drafting cows. No stripping cows now unless filter is dirty or SCC level increases.
- Remainder of year. One person milking.

Contact rearing

We contract rear all our replacement heifers. We send our heifers to Fermoy to Kathleen and Donal Howard. This is our second year in contract with this family. Our previous contract rearers converted their farm to dairying. We rear the calves until they are weaned and are ready to go to grass. Heifers do not return to the farm on December 1st prior to calving.

Grass management

Grass measurement is carried out by the farm team. Whoever is working on the farm on the day (usually a Monday or Tuesday) goes on the walk. The walk gives us time to clear our heads and allows everyone to get a better understanding of the grassland management plan for the week ahead - whether we need to supplement or remove grass surpluses.

Contracted jobs

The following tasks are contracted out:

- Fertiliser spreading;
- Spraying;
- Reseeding (ploughing, one pass, land levelling, lime spreading and rolling);
- Silage (bales & pit);
- Silage feeding in winter;
- Slurry and dung spreading.

Two contractors do all the contracting work for us. One feeds the silage, sprays and spreads fertiliser, draws and stacks bales of silage. The second carries out all other work on the farm. We try to organise big jobs like silage making by telling the contractors well in advance of our planned cutting date. We have built up great relationships with our contractors and get on really well.

Cover for time off

To cover time off, we guarantee every second weekend milkings so our relief workers know exactly when they are needed. By knowing this, if anyone needs to swap weekends we have plenty of time to give notice. The relief workers provide cover for holidays and days when we are busy such as herd testing or vaccinating.