

Think – and analyse – before you buy

What will make your rations cost effective and efficient this winter?

Just how 'cheap' are low-cost feeds? Could the true value of your grass and silage be further improved? And do low-cost feed ingredients really represent good value for money? We offer some pointers when looking to reduce feed costs this coming winter.

Monitoring feed costs this winter will be a top priority for producers, but buying the 'wrong' ingredient just because it seems cheap can end up being a costly mistake. That's the view of NWF technical manager Tom Hough, who stresses that it's important to take an overall approach to diet formulation in order to produce a ration that allows cows to milk to their potential.

"Producers should stick to three golden rules when it comes to buying feed ingredients. It's surprising how many producers rush to buy cheap feeds without following them through – like working out how they fit in to the ration – and then run into trouble," he says.

The first rule is to make sure you know exactly what you need to balance your herd's ration, so forage analysis is vital. "First-cut silage this year will be incredibly variable and the right choice of supplement will depend on the nutrient balance required to complement particular silages.

"Buying feeds without the benefit of an accurate silage analysis could lead to the wrong feed being purchased, or to too much or too little being ordered," he says.

"A feed may appear to be cheap, but if it is not what you need then it can be very expensive."

Feed value

The second rule is to make sure you know the analysis and feed value of all the ration ingredients. Mr Hough says that there is a risk of inconsistency in analysis and that this can lead to variation in herd performance.

"The best way to avoid this risk is to buy only from a reputable source – one that is prepared to stand by the quality of its products. If you are tempted by apparently cheap 'spot loads' it is important to find out as much as possible about the feed and then to have a sample analysed as soon as the feed is delivered."

The third golden rule to follow before committing to a buying a feed is to check that there will be a consistent supply of it throughout the winter. Mr Hough recommends that feeds where supply can not be guaranteed should be avoided.

"Running out of a feed can cause real problems as the diet will need to be changed and this can affect cow performance, possibly checking yields and reducing fertility. It could also push up feed costs."

For many producers looking to get the best from their cows, he believes that blends could be a practical option as they can be tailored, load by load, to individual herds' needs.

"If feeds are purchased with no flexibility in the contract you are usually committed to that feed for the whole season. So what happens if forage quality deteriorates or you have to change the proportion of forages in the ration?"

"With blends it is much easier to change the specification to allow the ration to be fine tuned to get the best from forages and avoid costly mistakes. The flexibility is enhanced still further when molasses blends are used in conjunction with contracted blends," adds Mr Hough.

When it comes to grass and silage –



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traditionally the lowest cost feed on many dairy units – producers should consider whether, apart from increasing DM yields, it would pay to change the sward content. And is it worth changing the silaging system to provide even more value for money?

In a recently published report by the Kingshay Farming Trust, supported by Advanta Seeds, the economic values of different grazing leys and forages were evaluated and ways to boost forage returns identified.

"Grass has always been a cheap feed," says Advanta Seeds' Ian Misselbrook. "And with high feed prices it is – relatively – even cheaper. But even better value can be made from grass by thinking of it as a crop. By ensuring that quality leys are

sown, for both grazing and cutting, and you can look forward to maximising yields, palatability and digestibility."

Higher protein

"For all grass leys, yields are greater in the first few years, and then they gradually decline. So the report looks at average values across these five years – a dry matter yield of 8.8t/ha, energy content of 11.5MJ/kg DM, and crude protein of 17%. This gives a cost of 3.2p to produce a litre of milk from this field," explains Mr Misselbrook.

"That figure includes the average farm costs – using current input prices – of fieldwork, seed, fertiliser and herbicide inputs, as well as variable costs, machinery costs and rent.



Tom Hough: "Stick to three golden rules when it comes to buying feed ingredients"

"But if the ley is older or poorly managed and infested with weeds, or contains bare ground caused by poaching, then resultant dry matter yields and quality will be reduced and the cost of producing a litre of milk will be far higher."

An example of a poor quality ley is one where only 5.6t/ha of dry matter is utilisable, energy content is lower at 10.3 MJ/kg DM and protein stands at just 15%. It costs 5p to produce a litre of milk from this sward – an additional cost of more than 50%.

"On the other hand, a clover-rich grass ley will have a higher protein content and better nutritional quality, as well as requiring less fertiliser thanks to the nitrogen-fixing properties of the clover," says Mr Misselbrook.

"Dry matter yields and energy content are likely to be similar to those of a grass only ley, but protein content will be around 2% higher. This reduces the cost of producing milk, down to 2.8ppl.

Producers with grass-only leys can add white clover by slot-seeding or overseeding. This is best done when the grass has been cut short after silaging, or after being grazed down tight by sheep. "Due to the seed's tiny size we'd also recommend using pelleted clover containing a biological seed treatment, such as Headstart."

The true value of different silages has also been calculated by the report. "A first cut of silage taken from a well-managed grass ley with low white clover



Ian Misselbrook: "Get more value from your grass by thinking of it as a crop"

content can be expected to support production of a litre of milk at a cost of 5.3p, based on a dry matter yield of 5t/ha, an ME of 11.2 MJ/kg DM and a crude protein content of 15%.

Italian ryegrass

"Subsequent cuts will be of poorer quality and lower yields – resulting in costs of milk production of 6ppl and 6.7ppl for second and third cut respectively," says Mr Misselbrook.

"An alternative, where leys are to be used for silage only, is to sow Italian ryegrass-based leys, such as Sinclair McGill's Colossal Silage, which is quick to establish. It will only last two years, but it can support three cuts in each of those years.

"This type of ley can produce an annual utilised dry matter yield of 12.2t/ha, with an ME of 11 MJ/kg DM and a crude protein content of 13%. Although this is lower in protein than a typical grass sward, its yield and energy content make it a more cost-effective option as the average cost, across the three cuts, is 5.8ppl of milk produced.

"Producers should consider whether changing sward content could improve the cost-effectiveness – and value – of their grazed grass and silage. Clover is certainly a must these days, and Italian ryegrasses could also be useful in some situations."

Rachael Porter