

# Efficiency vital this winter

Efficient production is essential when margins are under increased pressure

Taking shelter under an 'umbrella of efficiency' may be the outlook for this winter. We spoke to two nutritional experts to assess the pro-active measures that can be taken to ensure that your herd – and business – thrives at housing.

Producers are only too well aware of the increased costs of feed, fertiliser, fuel and finance. "There was hope that plenty of high quality silage would be available this winter, but after a summer of poor weather this is not the case," says Greenmount College's senior dairy and business technologist Nigel Murphy. This view is echoed by Thompsons' Hugh McCluggage who uses the results of 750 first-cut silages from Northern Ireland (see Table 1) that have been analysed by the AFBI Research Centre in County Down to gain an insight into requirements for the winter. Mr McCluggage stresses the need for silage analysis. "This will ensure that an effective feeding programme is created by your nutritionist to get the best results from the silage available." Mr Murphy looks at this from a financial viewpoint. "More concentrates will be needed to maintain body condition and to ensure cows get back into calf. With cereal prices falling, the energy components should cost less, however the



Hugh McCluggage of Thompsons stresses the need for silage analysis

protein components are remaining stubbornly high. "The combined effect is that any cost reduction will be modest compared to the 30% increase experienced in concentrate costs during the past year," he adds. Most of the other costs are also likely to remain high and the impact of increased electricity costs will continue to place upward pressure on overhead costs.

So, in these difficult conditions how should producers respond? First, make efficiency a priority. With the rise in milk price in 2007 and milk quota not imposing any significant barrier to production, many producers responded by increasing output through feeding more concentrates.

"It was an easy solution to push cows to their full



potential. But with the tightening of the ratio of milk price to concentrate price this approach needs to be re-examined," says Mr Murphy.

### Target feeding

In 2007 one litre of milk purchased about 1.3kg of concentrate, but this year it is likely to purchase less than a kilogram.

"You need to switch your mindset from pushing output to one where efficiency is the priority. And with tighter margins there needs to be tighter control of inputs if profits are to be protected.

"And any expansion must be linked to efficiency gains so that you benefit financially from your investments," stresses Mr Murphy. "If you don't, you could find experience no real financial gain because the depreciation of your facilities has swallowed up the extra income you have generated."

On a practical level, feeding must be targeted. The

*It was an easy solution to push cows, but this approach needs to be re-examined*

key to efficient milk production this winter will be matching the forage and feeds available to the cows' requirements. "Take time to plan winter feeding to ensure silage is complemented with the correct levels of energy and protein to maintain milk yield and quality at cost effective levels.

"This is particularly important when including alternative forages in the diet, as the price of purchased protein may continue to rise, making forage maize and whole crop wheat expensive forages to balance," says Mr Murphy.

The trend towards TMRs has continued with the yield per cow difference between non-TMR and TMR-fed herds almost 850 litres more for the latter. However efficiency is not as good with TMR-fed herds, with many producing 660 litres fewer from forage. Guidance must also be taken from the outlook of silage quality from first cuts as stated by

	2008	2007
dry matter	29.5	24.7
PH	4.1	4.1
ammonia (% total N)	7.7	7.9
protein (%DM)	12.9	12.6
ME (MJ/kg DM)	11.0	10.8
D-value	69	67
silage intake	94	89

Table 1: Comparison of first-cut silage 2008/2007

Mr McCluggage. "The good wilting weather in May has resulted in extremely good dry matters. This will have a positive effect on silage intakes. However, a few producers with dry matters of more than 50% will have to give attention to clamp management, to avoid heating and some samples will require the addition of water to the TMR.

### Calving difficulties

"In some cases stale cows are being overfed concentrates, which is not only a waste of money but can also lead to subsequent calving difficulties and poorer performance in the next lactation. This highlights the importance of batching cows in these systems," says Mr Murphy. Targeting the best quality forage towards early lactation cows and higher yielding animals should be the aim of all producers.

As margins come under pressure, it is also important to have good systems to capture all the key business information for your farm. For many producers, record keeping and using records to manage the business is consigned to the bin of good intentions. Fortunately there are now technology solutions available that make data capture and processing much easier and free up more time for producers to spend on using the information to manage their businesses.

"And benchmarking will also help you to evaluate the performance of your business compared to other similar businesses," says Mr Murphy. "It will also help you to identify what you are doing well and discover areas where there's potential for improvement."

Allison Matthews