

Take a timely look at your winter feed stocks

# Focus on forage options

The weather has played havoc with silage crops this year, with first-cut silage yields well down on previous years and maize and wheat crops, destined for winter forage use, also looking somewhat meager. So how can producers bolster forage stock with wholecrop and other feeds?

text Allison Matthews and Rachael Porter

The late spring 'drought' means that although first-cut silage quality was generally good, yield was not in many parts of the UK. And many producers are pinning their winter forage 'hopes' on second cut, wholecrop forages and maize.

"Not only is there an issue with producing grass silage this year, but also the lack of grazing has meant that many producers are already eating into next winter's silage stocks," says Ecosyl's Shirley Heron.

"With drought problems facing other countries worldwide it looks like many producers are facing a double blow of winter forage shortages and high bought-in feed prices.

"So if there was ever a year to ensure nothing gets wasted, this is it. It is vitally important that your silage management is up to scratch – both for making it and feeding it," she warns.

## Cereal crops

This is also a time to consider very carefully what you are going to do if you have cereal crops.

You may get a good price for the grain if you sell it, but it is important to think how much it is going to cost to buy it back again?

"Luckily the MGA reports that most maize crops are fairing pretty well and growth has taken off due to recent rain. The exception is the eastern side of the country, namely East Anglia, where the crops have suffered due to the extremely dry weather conditions.

"Knowing that you have enough forage to last you through the winter may be preferable to the as yet unknown cost of next winter's bought-in feed," says Dr Heron.

"At least that way you can plan and

budget ahead. If you do decide to keep the crop you will have a number of options about how best to store it." Assessing stocks and planning for what forage will be needed to last through the winter may prove preferable to the potential cost of bought-in feed and it's

*Harvest hope: rain in June means that cereal crops could offer a useful boost for poor first-cut silage yields and low forage stocks*

essential if producers are to remain within budgetary constraints.

There are several options for holding on to cereal crops, according to Dr Heron.

"If you do decide to keep the crop you will have a number of options. The first decision is dependent on whether you

are looking for quantity or quality. If bulk forage is the aim you need to conserve it as wholecrop – literally the whole crop – either by fermentation or by adding urea.

"There are benefits with both and a number of things need to be considered, such as how each feed would suit your system, harvest timing and what you want to sow afterwards.

"But if the crop is under-sown you will only be able to ferment it. If you want to bump up the quality a little, without sacrificing too much yield, you could cut the crop a little higher to include more grain and less stem," she says.

"If you are lucky enough to have had some rain, and forage bulk is not a big issue, you could go the whole hog and take the grains on their own.

"These could either be dry rolled or as high moisture grains, if you combine three or four weeks early.

"High moisture grains can be conserved whole or crimped and using a number of different methods, ranging from low pH by fermentation or with acid or high pH after treatment with urea or caustic soda.

"There is little loss of yield by taking the grains early and the greener straw has a higher nutritional value and can be ensiled to provide a valuable feed for dry stock," adds Dr Heron.

## Difficult season

Biotal's Roy Eastlake agrees that conserving cereal crops can help offset the impact of a difficult grass silage season.

"Producers who are growing cereal crops for ensiling, or who can purchase standing crops, can use cereal forages to help overcome the limitations of first cut.

Developments in harvesting and

preservation technology mean that producers have more choice about the stage at which they harvest the crop," he explains.

His advice is to calculate the amount of grass silage in stock and estimate second-cut, if they are yet to take it, and maize yields so they can make a decision about how much wholecrop silage is required. And where they find they are likely to be short of grass silage, he says to make a fermented wholecrop silage to provide sufficient total forage.

He also recommends the use of a crop-specific inoculant because the high levels of dry matter puts the forage at risk of heating and moulding during feed out.

Later harvested crops should be considered as a forage:concentrate and will require processing or milling, via the forage harvester, to ensure all the grain is utilised by animal.

The feed will have a higher starch content, but a lower level of effective fibre due to the processing of the grain fraction.

## Crimped grain

The final option is to harvest as crimped grain, which provides a high energy and moist concentrate. This can replace combined grain in the diet and allow a possible saving in purchased feed.

"As the starch in crimped cereals is fermented more slowly than ground or rolled cereals, it can be used to increase cereal inclusion rates in diets without increasing the risk of acidosis," he adds.

The crop is passed through a crimping machine, which breaks open the seed coat to expose the starch, prior to treatment with an inoculant and ensiling.

As crimping involves combining crops around three weeks earlier than a conventional harvest, it is important to make a decision to crimp grain as soon as possible.

"Fermented wholecrop and crimped cereals need to be ensiled with an inoculant to improve aerobic stability, inhibit the growth of yeasts and moulds, and to reduce heating.

"Wholecrop and crimped cereals are very cost-effective on a tonnes of dry matter basis.

"And by assessing forage stocks early it will be possible to make the right harvesting decision to produce the most suitable form of conserved cereals, ensuring adequate feed stocks and help control overall feed costs," he adds. |

