

Forage failures will damage summer profit margins

Grazing-plan priorities

Milk from forage – particularly grazed grass – has declined. And low milk prices mean that cost control and grass has an important role to play in every system. We offer some advice on how to put a plug in the drain on milk from forage.

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Milk yield has increased by more than 1,000 litres per cow during the past 10 years, as genetics and nutrition have improved. However almost an additional tonne of concentrate has been added to achieve this increase in milk output.

“As a consequence milk from forage (MFF) has fallen considerably during the same period,” explains Greenmount College’s senior dairy technologist, Michael Verner. “More and more producers are struggling to rise to the challenge of effectively utilising a grazing platform, which has often not increased proportionally as herd size has grown. As individual cow yields have improved many producers have been reluctant to turn high yielding cows out to grass.”

Four litre advantage

For more than a decade the data from 450 dairy units has been collated to produce a clear picture of what is happening at farm level.

“This benchmarking data indicates that as MFF increases, margin per cow increases, demonstrating the clear financial benefits of increasing milk from forage,” adds Mr Verner.

The variance in figures between the top and the bottom 25% shows a difference in margin of more than £630 per cow, or £75,000 to the average producer. The information coming out of Thompsons’ Milk Manager backs this up.

“Producers in the top 25% of the dataset are achieving an extra four litres from forage than the average,” explains Thompsons’ Stephen Agnew.

But on a practical level what does this really mean? With a rolling herd average of 8,300 litres, Mark Scott, the manager of Greenmount’s Future Herd explains how it is already enjoying the financial benefits of early grazing.

“A group of 50 cows were selected during mid March yielding less than 27 litres and more than 120 days in milk. These cows were grazed initially for four hours per day rising to 24 hours during a period of between 10 and 14 days. With the excellent weather conditions seen in late March, high yielding cows have also been grazed for four hours per day to help keep grass supply under control and substitute conserved forages.”

Grazing timetable

The stage of lactation, yield and pregnancy status must be considered when turn-out plans are made. But, as Mr Scott warns, the plans must not compromise the output of the most productive cows. These have spent a winter consuming concentrates through a combination of TMR and in-parlour feeding.

“When these cows are accustomed to spreading their intake over the course of the day, it may prove a better option to continue housing the high yielding cows at night with TMR feeding. This offers both metabolic and financial benefits.

“This will allow these cows to utilise grass during the day but still draw out the concentrate feeding and avoid excess acid loading on the rumen. With the high yielding cows at grass for just four hours a day and mid-lactation cows out for half a day, the Future Herd is saving 1.4 tonnes of silage and 165kg of concentrate per day,” adds Mr Scott.

As the grazing cycle begins, there are firm plans in place at Greenmount which provide a clear pathway to summer grazing. As Mr Scott explains this includes the goal of having the first rotation of the grazing platform completed, with the grass wedge in place, by April 23.



Michael Verner: “As milk prices struggle, grass is a key linchpin for profit margins”

“This wedge illustrates the grass cover on each paddock and should ideally run evenly from the most recent paddock grazed (1,600kg DM/ha) to the next paddock for grazing (3,200kg DM/ha). After this key date it is important that the rotation stays on track for the rest of the grazing season.

“Any paddocks recorded with grass covers greater than the target must be cut and removed from the rotation early. It is also vital that a paddock is taken from the timetable at the time it was due to be grazed, therefore keeping its place in the rotation and avoiding any grass shortage. Decisive action early in the season is essential if the rewards of using grass throughout the year are to be achieved,” he says.

The top 25% of benchmarked farms puts a perspective on what potential forage holds, but as Mr Verner concludes there are lots of ways to erode profit margins and producers must keep a keen eye on their own potential.

“A reasonable level of output must always be balanced against the costs of production. ‘Bulk-tank watching’ is a distraction from efficient milk production. Grazed grass continues to have the potential to reduce feed costs – provided it is grown and utilised efficiently. Within Northern Ireland all types of milk production system can operate profitably with many smaller family run businesses competing, and at times outperforming, the larger units.” |

Future herd: grazing high yielders in March has conserved forage levels



Getting to grips with grass

From a nutritional point of view, it can be difficult to move from the winter position of knowing exactly how much feed your cows are consuming to a point where you are estimating both intake and quality of grazed grass.

Once cows are grazing full time, expect intakes of around 15kgDM per cow per day. At current GrassCheck energy

levels of 11.8MJ/kgDM, this should support maintenance plus 18 litres of milk.

Maintenance-plus levels should be regularly reviewed throughout the grazing season to take account of grass supply and quality.

Ultimately, to maximise milk from forage, producers should:

- Aim for good yields but not ‘yield’ at any cost.
- Maximise the intake of grazed grass in the diet.
- Target meal feeding to cows that will respond.
- Above all pay attention to detail.