

Precision feeding is the key to combating rising feed prices

# Time to take control

For many producers the solution to high feed prices could lie in precision feeding – increasing the proportion of the diet that is fed on an individual cow basis. Who better to ask that two of the UK's leading nutritionists and a producer who's been using out-of-parlour feeders for more than 15 years.

text Rachael Porter

Groups or individual feeding – both are better than feeding an entire herd the same ration. This later option means some cows could be over fed with others under fed.

Over feeding makes a hefty and unnecessary dent in the feed bill and can also result in over-fat cows at calving and a myriad of problems associated with that. Underfeeding is fraught with problems too – not least a loss of potential milk production. NWF Agriculture's Mike Phillips says that the one downside to feeding more of a cow's diet on a herd basis, down the feed trough, is a loss of precision.

And he adds that increasing precision is the best way to maximise the return from expensive inputs.

Mike Phillips: "Increasing precision is the best way to maximise returns"



"Developments in TMR systems have helped underpin improvements in the way cows are fed – raising intakes, improving rumen health and helping to drive up yields," he says. "The downside is that while feeding for the average cow is appropriate for the majority of the cows, there are problems with the extremes, the high and low yielders, particularly on farms where grouping cows accurately is difficult."

The consequence is that high yielders end up being underfed, leading to excess condition score loss and problems with getting cows back in calf. "Conversely, late lactation cows can get over fat and

this increases the incidence of problems around calving. Both of these will reduce margins," adds Mr Phillips.

"On every unit the main conversation surrounds how to reduce feed costs per litre and this usually leads to discussions about how to reduce feed use, cutting prices or both. But in many cases the best option is not to look at what you feed and instead focus on who you feed, even if this means increasing the amount of dairy compounds used."

## Greater precision

Mr Phillips believes the question to ask is: can I use feed more precisely? Would it pay to reduce the level of the outside ration and feed more to those cows that warrant it, either through the parlour or out-of-parlour feeders (OOPFs). Can we get more feed into the high yielders and reduce the amount fed in late lactation? "Using our unique feed calculator allows the detailed calculation of feed levels on a group by group basis. We are regularly seeing significant savings per cow per month just by feeding more precisely and this is after allowing for the higher price of compounds compared to blends or straights. And waste levels with compounds are lower than with blends. This is an invisible but real cost that is

reduced by more precise feeding. He explains that any producer who has in-parlour or OOPFs needs to work out the possible savings from precision feeding. For others now may be the time to assess the benefits of installing feeders," he says.

Thompsons' nutritionist Stephen Agnew agrees. "We're seeing a lot of our customers opting to install out-of-parlour feeders. Particularly the small-to-medium-sized herds where it's difficult to split the herd into two or three groups according to yield." He says that with feed prices so high, investing in OOPFs is becoming a more and more attractive prospect. "We're definitely seeing a swing towards individual feeding across the board – great news for the cows and the bank balance."

## Avoid trouble

There's only so much concentrate that can be fed through the parlour. "I'd say about 10kg a day maximum, if you want to avoid trouble," says Mr Agnew. This can be increased considerably, according to yield, by using OOPFs. An additional 15kg can be fed to some of the highest yielders, dribble fed during a 24-hour period.

"Producers can group and feed cows successfully according to yield. But it's still not strictly targeted individual



Stephen Agnew: "OOPFs are proving the best option for many producers"

feeding. Feeding can be more precise and more efficient," says Mr Agnew.

And this 'efficiency' is about more than just feed costs and use. OOPFs are a less labour intensive option compared to grouping. Indeed, many of Mr Agnew's clients who use OOPFs are one-man bands. And there's little or no extra labour involved in taking this approach.

If cows are fed according to yield and over and under feeding are avoided, the efficiency spreads into production and fertility and, ultimately, the bottom line. Installing OOPFs for a 100-cow herd requires an investment of around £10,000 – for three feeders, each capable of feeding 30 cows a day, and 100 collars. "Producers should quickly see a return on their investment – particularly with feed prices being so high," he adds. |

## Concise and controlled

Omagh-based producer Drew McConnell has fed his 150-cow herd using OOPFs for the past 15 years and says that, for him, there's no better way to feed dairy cows.

Up to 8kg of an 18% CP concentrate is fed through the unit's 10:20 swing-over parlour and higher yielders are 'topped up' using two OOPFs at Carrigans Farm. One typically contains a 19% CP concentrate and the other dispenses a high-energy blend. "For me it's the most targeted and efficient way to feed my herd." His milkers are split into two groups: low yielders, who average 27 litres and are currently grazing and fed concentrates through the parlour; and high yielders, averaging 41 litres and who also have access to the OOPFs.

"This means that they have access to concentrates on a 'little and often' basis, which avoids acidosis and any other digestive upsets. Some of my

highest yielders are eating between 22kg and 24kg of concentrates a day in the winter and I never have a problem with acidosis – sub clinical or clinical."

Mr McConnell has only seen two displaced abomasums on his unit too and one was a cow that he'd just bought in. "The other had just had an exceptionally large calf. Neither case was related to the way I feed the herd."

His system plays a vital role in achieving the herd's average yield of 9,516kg, at 4.19% butterfat and 3.31% protein.

"But there's more to OOPFs that just getting good yields. Body condition score across the herd is pretty uniform, I don't have to run the herd as two groups and I'm not wasting feed. I feel I'm doing all I can to keep my feed costs from spiralling out of control – that's worth a lot in terms of peace of mind at the moment."



Feeding to yield: out-of-parlour feeders allow producers to meet individual cows' exact nutritional requirements