

Fresh ideas to help stretch supplies when forage is short

Good housekeeping

Something as simple as minimising waste and maintaining a tidy clamp face can help to eke out those precious forage supplies this winter. And knowing exactly what's in your clamps is also vital, according to the UK's leading nutritionists.

text **Rachael Porter**

Forage stocks are low and producers are all praying for an early turnout. So says Somerset-based independent nutritionist Trevor Birchall.

The majority of his clients have had ration reformulations so far this winter, with more to come on some units, in a bid to eke out forage supplies and to keep diet changes to a minimum.

"It's best to act early and work with what you've got, particularly since buying in forage and moist feeds is nigh on impossible this year. The feeds are either already forward bought on contract or just unavailable."

Independent dairy nutritionist Hefin Richards agrees that early action is key and is urging producers to assess forage stocks now: "Don't leave it a moment longer if you're concerned you won't have enough to last the winter," he says, adding that for every producer who has a handle on forage stocks, there are several who haven't.

"It's been a tough 12 months and what's going on out there varies from unit to unit – the situation is extremely variable, with those in the north and south of the country generally fairing worse than those in the midlands.

"There are some producers with enough quality forage to see them through to turnout, but there are also many where

supplies are very short. And, of those, some have grasped the nettle and have a plan in place. Alarming, there are also those that don't."

Mr Richards, who is from the Profeed Nutrition Consultancy, says that he understands why producers are avoiding facing the prospective problem head on. "It's not going to be an easy one to tackle this year and will, invariably, involve buying in feed – if you can get your hands on any. Feed prices are high and belts have already been tightened. There are some producers out there who want to avoid tightening them any more.

Assess stocks

"But the irony is that any potential forage shortage will cost them more, the longer they avoid facing up to the problem."

Solving a shortage issue will also become trickier as times ticks on. Brewers' grains, pressed pulp and fodder beet are all in extremely short supply or unavailable and this is set to continue as the winter progresses.

"The starting point is to assess stocks and I mean really assess them – honestly. It's vital to get to grips with what you've got and to be realistic.

"And to keep checking on a weekly basis – put a mark on the silage clamp wall

and keep the face tidy. If you've 10 panels and you use a panel a week, then you know you have 10 weeks of silage left. If 10 weeks won't be enough, you can start to take action now."

He stresses that the sooner producers act, the more subtle changes in the ration can be. "That's so much better than running out of silage and it avoids massive dietary changes."

Silage for milking cows

One of the easiest ways to eke out forage is to feed a little more concentrate and drop the forage content of the ration a little – let the substitution effect take the strain. Mr Richards also urges producers to take young stock off grass silage. "They'll do just fine on straw and concentrates. Milking cows must be a priority for all available silage."



Winter feeding pointers

- Assess forage stocks honestly and carefully monitor use on a weekly basis. Act early if a shortage looks likely.
- Silages should be fed only to the milking herd – heifers and dry stock can be fed straw and concentrates.
- Reduce milking cow numbers, either

by drying off late lactation and low yielding cows a bit earlier or culling problem cows. This will create a more efficient herd and reduce pressure on forage stocks.

- Minimise silage waste. Keep clamp faces tidy and forage handling equipment in good working order.



Hefin Richards: "Assess stocks honestly"

Mr Birchall agrees "Grass silage – the very best stuff you have – should be fed only to your milking herd and preferably the higher yielders.

"Feeding should, most definitely, be targeted. If you have cows in your early group that just aren't performing, move them to the mid or the late group. Don't keep throwing feed at them. This isn't the year to be doing that. In some instances it's time to cut your losses and focus on those that are producing plenty of milk."

Indeed, a third tactic is to dry off the late lactation milkers a little earlier than usual and to cull any of the poorer quality animals in the herd. "Reducing your milking herd size, by say 10%, can really help to eke out forage stocks without compromising the bottom line. Numbers can quickly be restored again with spring calvers once the forage shortage is over and, in my experience, many producers end up with a leaner, meaner herd."

Waste – or rather reducing it – can also have a significant impact on forage stock. "It's typical to go on farm and hear concerns about stocks only to see silage dropped all over the place," says Mr Richards. "Something as simple as fixing a tine on a shear grab can make all the difference here. Minimising waste is an easy way to eke out supplies. Every little helps."

Mycotoxin risk

Silage quality is causing a few issues too, particularly due to mycotoxins. Mr Richards has included a mycotoxin binder in all his rations this winter. "I've taken a belt-and-braces approach this

year, particularly where second-cut silage, wholecrop wheat and maize silage are being fed.

"2012 was such a wet and challenging year and many crops were affected by fungal disease. For a high production herd I think using a binder is good insurance. Generally I'd take a 'suck it and see' approach with forages, but this year the risk is just too great.

"There are so many challenges for the cows and producers and this is one thing that can be easily eliminated, before it becomes a problem.

"You don't need a huge response in cow health, productivity and fertility to justify the investment – it's easy to see a return," he adds.

Mr Birchall stresses that it's vital to protect herd fertility. "I'm urging my clients to focus on getting cows back in calf. They have to get back in calf if the business is to have a chance of catching up next year. The last thing producers need after a year like 2012 is a huge slip in the calving interval," he says.

"Get them in calf on time and the herd will be ready to go when grass and forage supplies return to relative normality." |



Targeted feeding: milking cows must be a priority for all available silages