



If silage is low or poor quality, what are the tried and tested options?

Forage shortage solutions

As many producers hope for early turnout this spring, as well as improved silage crops, the quality and quantity of forage stocks continues to be a headache. We spoke to two producers to see how they're coping and what they hope 2013 will bring.

text **Allison Matthews**

With the cost of producing milk exceeding 29ppl, summer 2012's milk price of between 21ppl and 25ppl created difficult financial circumstances for many producers.

This was compounded by poor weather conditions that hampered grazing opportunities and resulted in a poor forage harvest, and many producers are now in dire need of much better conditions in 2013.

"Producers have been struggling with mediocre forage this winter, but it is not all bad news," says Thompsons' dairy specialist Stephen Agnew. "Producers taking their first cut in a two-week window at the end of May 2012 have maintained their performance. But these producers have seen a daily difference of up to five litres per cow when feeding poorer quality second cut."

The Graham family, from County Antrim, feel that 2012 is a grass year they would rather forget.

"Cow condition and yield were difficult to maintain last summer when the grazing situation was less than ideal," says Bryan Graham, who farms with his father, William-Robert, and his mother June in a small village close to Belfast.

Positive action

"Traditionally we ran the herd on an easy-feed system, with twice a day in-parlour feeding. In 2012 we added two out-of-parlour feeders, which have undoubtedly helped counteract the negative impact poor forage was having on both the cows' body condition and fertility."

The Grahams took steps to improve the energy level of their herd's ration by feeding four kilogrammes of concentrate as a base feed in the parlour and a maximum of 10 kg in the OOPFs.

"From the start of summer 2012, the main theme has been a shortfall in energy and protein due to poor grazing. Cow body condition can suffer, creating a knock-on effect on fertility, with cows often struggling to show signs of oestrus and maintain pregnancy," says Stephen. "Where cows have experienced prolonged periods of negative energy, milk protein is also becoming an issue." If fertility and milk protein are a problem, forage analysis will identify whether feed rates need to be altered to ensure sufficient energy is being provided. If there is a problem then the addition of maize, wheat, barley or a rumen-protected fat can all serve to boost energy levels.



Bryan Graham: "Being clever with our available forage made a difference"

Despite the challenges of 2012, Mr Graham's pedigree Holstein herd is achieving impressive results with cows averaging more than 30 litres a day with a milk composition of 4.3% butterfat and 3.16% protein.

"Our second-cut silage was harvested in late July and consequently is of much poorer quality than the first cut, which we made in late May.

"Feeding the first and second cut in combination has meant that we have maintained a consistent diet throughout the winter. This has been backed up by a critical assessment of how we balance this with our ration," says Bryan.

Informed decisions

This year highlights the importance of making good quality forage. Whether it is first-, second- or third-cut silage, producers can no longer afford to allow a lack of quality forage to impact on cow performance.

With a poor harvest and cows being housed for much of the summer, forage shortages are widespread.

"For many herds evasive action has already been taken with a lack of forage available for purchase. More stringent culling policies have been put in place with many producers taking the view that there is no room for passengers," says Stephen. "Abattoirs have confirmed that there is a 20% increase in the throughput of cows from the dairy herd in 2012 compared to 2011.

"With a shortfall in alternative moist feeds, producers who need to make up a forage deficit have had to increase the level of hay or straw in the ration, with increased levels of concentrate."

When a third-cut of silage is not possible and the first cut is lighter than required, action needs to be taken. Dessie McCrea had the foresight in November 2012 to



Dessie McCrea: "We were 700 tonnes short of forage, but took action"

realise that the forage he had would not support his 350-cow herd, based in County Tyrone, through the winter.

"With a large herd the stakes are higher and although quality silage is important, quantity can become a real issue.

"When we did the sums with our Thompsons nutritionist, we knew we were going to be 700 tonnes short of fresh weight forage.

Concentrate levels

"At this point we decided to feed replacement heifers 2kg of straw per head to replace silage. We then increased concentrate levels accordingly to 4kg a day to maintain energy density and daily liveweight gain," says Dessie.

But the shortfall in silage not only affected the youngstock but also the diet of the milking herd, which was also re-evaluated.

"Our dairy blend was re-formulated to increase levels of soya hulls and sugar beet pulp and, therefore, the digestible fibre percentage of the ration. We also upped our concentrate feed rate from 7kg to 9kg through the TMR.

"Silage consumption of the poorer second-cut silage was reduced by up to 8kg fresh weight. We knew it was working well after six days when silage intake was down and yields were up by 1.2 litres a cow," says Dessie.

Although the vision of an early turnout is motivating many, producers must be realistic about their options for feeding cows still housed.

February signifies the latter stages of winter, but complacency at this stage would be foolish.

"Producers must maintain a routine of assessing both quality and quantity of forages stocks to ensure that a herd with freshly calved cows can hold their performance," adds Stephen Agnew. |