

The grass-based management system is in Grass-based system:

A wide range of dairy systems are now acknowledged as being successful and profitable and there's been a recent resurgence in grass-based, block-calving systems. So we ask if it would suit every dairy business.

text **Rachael Porter & Karen Wright**

Could – and would – the current trend towards grass-based systems carry on indefinitely? What about domestic milk production and supply? And what is needed to support successful grass-based systems?

DairyCo's grass specialist Piers Badnell says that, with regard to 'could' more producers benefit from switching to a grass-based system, most producers could indeed increase the amount of milk their herd's produce from grazed grass and forage. As for 'would' they make the switch, he says it's probably a 'no'. "We have an exceptional climatic advantage in the UK – we can grow very good grass. But success with this grass is very much about management, infrastructure and the sheer will to do it and do it well. Not all units and producers have all those things."

For some units, such as those split by main roads or with land that's a long way from the main farm buildings, a grass-based system may be out of the question. But for others it may just require minimal investment. "If producers want to get more from grass and invest in infrastructure – which on most units means good cow tracks – they will undoubtedly see financial benefits."

The right genetics

Mr Badnell adds that the right genetics are important too. "Look at the cow – not just the system. Will she produce efficiently on a grass-based system? Or is she better suited to a more intensive management set up?"

"A Holstein herd averaging between 8,000 and 9,000 litres could be run on a grass-based system. An in-calf cow that's producing between 25 and 30 litres a day is a grazing cow. Cows not in calf and giving more than that could take around 25% of their daily requirement from grazed grass so would also need supplementary feeding."

Simple system: maximising milk production from grass



creasing in popularity, but is it for everyone?

niche or mainstream?



So, switching to a grass-based system is not simply a case of turning out high performance, large Holstein-type herd to grass. Neither is it true that you have to exclusively breed a small, lower milk production cow to thrive on an extensive grazing system, according to Geno UK managing director Wes Bluhm. “But what is true is that you need to breed the right cow for the job. If you do this the whole system is easier and more profitable. If you have the wrong cow you’re always fighting against the system.”

Those adopting grass-based systems typically look to maximise milk from grass.

“To accomplish this they must have a tight calving pattern.” he adds. “And this means we need fertile cows that get back in calf. This is why we’ve seen many grazing based herds switch to cross breeding where they can reap the benefits of the more fertile breeds like the Scandinavian breeds. The yield and improved fertility complement the traditional breeding.”

Wide variation

But on any unit the grazing area and therefore the number of animals is limited. “We refer to this as the ‘grazing platform’. In most cases the limitation is getting enough quality grass off the available area. The only way to move forward is to increase production and to get more solids per cow within this platform while maintaining fertility and health. And for this reason we’re seeing a three way cross working well.”

An example might be the Norwegian or Swedish Red, Jersey and the Holstein. This combination typically brings a herd of hard-wearing cows with good health and fertility and good yields.

Mr Bluhm also stresses the importance of careful bull selection within the breed too. “There’s wide variation within any breed and it’s important that producers get help from advisers that are familiar with the particular breeds.”

As to how sustainable any system is though depends on the individual. “Only the producer can tell you this and every unit is different. In April 2013 the grazing-based producers were shovelling snow before they could milk cows but they did it and knew that their system was making money.

DairyCo data shows that the grazing people can have a higher ppl net margin so with the right help and right cows a grazing based dairy system can be highly successful.”

Mr Badnell says that a block-calving, grass-based system also offers ease of management. “If all your cows are in calf at the same time, it makes no



Grazing girls: consider herd genetics when contemplating a switch to a grass-based, block-calving system

difference if you have one or 300. They're all being managed in the same way at the same time. So yes, there are times of the year when you're extremely busy, but there are also times when there's very little to do and producers could even take a well-earned extended break away from the farm.

"The opportunity to take some time out should never be underestimated. Coming back to the business feeling fresh and with a clear perspective offers business and financial benefits of its own," Mr Badnell says.

Grass variability

That said, it's not for everyone. "Simply, because not everyone wants to manage their herd in this way. And the will to run such a system is key, since the success of such a system hinges on the person – or people – managing it."

Mr Badnell says he knows of two units that are similar in their size, cow numbers and set up. But benchmarking shows a difference in margin per litre of up to 20ppl: "And this is down to the person managing the unit."

He adds that the focus should be yield per hectare – not yield per cow. "The latter will tend to be lower on a grass-based system, but milk yield per hectare should be higher if it's managed well and producers focus on soil pH, P and K and producing more grass."

It's for this reason that Mr Badnell believes that a shift towards more grass-based systems should result in sustained UK milk production – not a decrease in domestic supply.

For those who are still not convinced, or are concerned that grass growth and quality tend to be variable on their unit, Provimi nutritionist Philip Ingram says that it does not need to be a question of 'to graze or not to graze?'

"Many dairy systems can incorporate grazing at different levels of intensity. Daytime grazing with night-time indoor feeding is also very prevalent."

He explains that this allows cows to graze when the grazing platform is insufficient to support full time grazing, and aids performance when cows are of high genetic merit and struggle to meet their needs from grass.

"It is particularly helpful in difficult grazing conditions. High production cows can be grazed in their late lactation group. And for most cattle access to good, well managed grassland for a proportion of the feeding will help intakes and milk output."

Nutritionally speaking, Dr Ingram says that a major downfall is that producers are often over-ambitious when it comes to predicting intakes from grass – particularly in early and late season. Recent economic modelling work shows that 'moderate systems' are actually the

most financially robust – they're more adaptable to the highs and lows of volatile markets. "A 'moderate system' is one where yields average between 7,000 and 8,000 litres and where cows are grazed and supplemented as required to sustain yields," he says.

Financial reward

Dr Ingram explains that the 'polarised' set ups are less flexible. "Grazing systems, which are focussed purely on maximising milk from grass, can be held back when milk markets are good because their limited output means they cannot reap rewards in a good economic climate.

"Similarly, dairies focussed purely on maximising milk yield per cow are stuck with high input costs that they simply cannot avoid when economics are not so good."

So, it seems that a 'grass' focus has benefits to offer most, if not all, producers. Whether you go all the way and adopt a spring block-calving system depends very much on your unit's suitability and your interest and ability to grow and utilise the green stuff. But those that do take the plunge and are committed to making it work through the system and through breeding, as many have and continue to do so, can rest assured that they will see a financial reward for their efforts. |