



As squeeze on milk prices continues, we spoke to leading agricultural consultant Jason McMinn for some pointers on reducing feed and 'culling' waste – and how to improve dairy margins – in a tough business climate.

Take a closer look at herd mortality and feed use

Waste not, want not



Two key areas where waste occurs on dairy units are also the areas that demand the greatest expenditure – livestock and feed. And the good news is that any 'waste' in both areas can be tackled relatively quickly and easily, and results can usually be seen relatively quickly.

Herd mortality is one area where a simply review of a herd culling policy can pay dividends, according to dairy consultant Jason McMinn.

"Every 3% of cow mortality – in other words involuntary culls – typically equates to 1ppl off the milk price for the herd," he says "The 'waste' here is a combination of lost litres, increased replacement costs and the potential value of cull cows. If a cow can't walk onto a lorry to leave the farm, it's worthless," he explains.

Casualty cows, or involuntary culls, can be injured or extremely lame cows that have to be shot on farm or they could be diseased cows, perhaps those with Johne's disease. "If herds are seeing an unusually high herd mortality rate – typically more than around 8% – it could be well worth investigating Johne's."

Mr McMinn says that stockmanship plays a key role here too. "It's vital to identify voluntary culls wherever possible. If culling is timely, it's still possible to realise some value for cull cows and to reduce 'waste'."

Mr McMinn works with herds in Northern Ireland, which comprise a total of 12,000 cows, and he says that the average mortality rate for his clients' herds is 4.9%. "This is respectable. You're never going to get it down to zero, but it typically varies between 1% and 14%. The latter is obviously extremely high and demands immediate attention.

"There will be specific reasons behind mortality for every herd and it's vital, particularly on units where the rate is creeping up towards the 10% mark, that producers work with their vet and

consultant to find out what's going on. "It's good for any business to know its herd mortality rate. Like calving interval, it doesn't tell you what the problem is but it certainly flags up that you need to take a closer look and do something to improve it."

Feed waste

Another major area of 'waste' on many units is feed – particularly on units that home mix.

"Most producers 'home mix' because they believe that they are saving money and, on paper, they can indeed save around £20 per tonne. But that rarely translates in practical terms," explains Mr McMinn.

"Much of the feed used for home mixing is tipped onto the floor – it's rarely stored in bins. As a result, birds have free access to it, it can easily be blown away by the wind and other losses occur when vehicles are used to load it into mixer wagons."

He refers to one client who worked out that he was purchasing 15% more feed than he was actually feeding to his herd. "That level of waste easily wiped out any cost saving benefits of purchasing a 'cheaper' home-mix feed."

He urges producers to either switch from home mixing, possibly opting for in- or out-of-parlour feeders instead. "Or invest in storage bins, ideally overhead ones, so feed can be directly and accurately 'measured' into the mixer wagon."

He says many producers do opt for bins: "And they can cut waste to between 7% and 8% – but this still not ideal. Again, waste will never be reduced to zero, whatever system is used.

"But it is possible to achieve much greater efficiency where feed is 'metered' either directly into a trough or a mixer wagon." With feed being such a huge cost on dairy units – typically between 8ppl and 10ppl – it's simply too expensive to ignore waste."