

Are your cows putting enough

Pushing production

We put three technical nutritionists under the spotlight to find out how they are advising producers to push up milk production – and profitability – at farm level as milk prices rise.

text **Allison Matthews**

While milk price – and producer optimism – will vary within the UK from region to region, there is still the continual need to focus on cow performance.

A sufficient quantity of high quality forage is a key driver of both physical and financial performance on farm. Most areas of the UK experienced a difficult summer in 2009 and the result is that what grass and maize silage is available is of variable quality. “So producers need to re-evaluate current diets,” says Thompsons’ ruminant nutritionist Mary-Jane Robinson. “The forage analysis that was used to balance the diet at the start of the winter may no longer be relevant and each producer must take a close look at what they are currently feeding.” The latest average taken from Thompson customer samples (Table 1) shows that, as more samples have been analysed, average figures for grass silage quality have decreased marginally from an already very average base. In conjunction with this, recent average figures for maize silage also show that this year’s crops, while showing an advantage above that of most grass silage, is still below average.

Strategic management

With measures taken to balance out and compensate for poor forage, Thompsons’ technical dairy specialist James Black points out that the issues affecting producers can also be tackled through strategic herd management.

“Irrespective of silage quantity or quality, early

Table 1: Grass silage analyses (source: Thompsons, January 2010)

	1st cut grass	2nd cut grass	maize
dry matter (DM) %	28.9	24.7	27
pH	4.1	4.0	—
NH ₃	7.6	7.3	—
CP %	11.6	11.7	9.1
ME (MJ/KgDM)	10.6	10.3	10.7
D value	66	65	—
SIP	90	85	—
starch %	—	—	22.4



milk in the tank this winter?

n and profitability



lactation cows will put milk in the tank to pay the bills this winter," he says.

"The milk:feed price ratio across the bulk of the UK still gives producers an opportunity to capitalise on the genetic potential of their freshly calved animals. If the cow can potentially yield more than 40 litres then the energy should be provided to do this. Dry, low energy silages are providing great foundations for rumen function, but are struggling to meet yield expectations," warns Mr Black.

The company's Milk Manager/Performance Monitor service reveals that herd performance is lagging, not only for stale cows but also cows in their first 100 days of lactation.

"The key to meeting cow requirements will be, as always, to maximise dry matter intake. Unfortunately, with poor quality forage, dry matter intakes will have to be increased through feeding extra concentrates. It is not uncommon for feed requirements of 16kg and more for 40 litres this winter," adds Mr Black.

Health warning

The strategy of maximising yields through concentrates comes with a health warning.

"Care should be taken to balance diets properly by making effective use of cereals, fibre in the grass silage and topping up with quality protein in the form of soya bean meal to achieve peak yield.

"It is essential that these feed levels are introduced gradually and fed over a number of feeds. And it is also essential that the cows have both the ability and facilities to allow them to achieve yields of more than 40 litres if these feed rates are adopted," adds Mr Black.

"Feed additives, such as buffers, yeasts and protected fats, should be utilised on the fresh element of the herd, particularly heifers with the feed rates required this winter. These products offer good returns on investment with current milk prices based on proven responses, whether that is in milk yield, cow health or fertility.

"Early lactation cows have the potential to make up some of the lost production from summer 2009, but care must be taken to ensure that they are not asked to produce more milk than their feed will allow."

Mid-lactation cows, between 120 and 240 days in milk, are struggling to hold milk yields on silages with energy contents below 10.7MJ/kg/DM. Cows that are 200 days plus and pregnant should be made to work hard from the forage provided.

"Chasing milk by feeding these cows extra concentrate is unlikely to be profitable unless silage is in very short supply. At all times with this batch



Mary-Jane Robinson



Richard Moore



James Black

of cows they should be treated as individuals within the group allowing for stage of lactation, pregnancy status and current milk yield," says Mr Black.

While peak production cows are paying the bills today, when planning for the next 12 months, dry cow and late lactation management are crucial.

Thompsons' technical specialist Richard Moore says that there are two key objectives for producers to follow with regards to late lactation management – efficient milk production and a body condition score target of between 2.75 and 3.25.

Not essential

"Both objectives are inter-related. Excessive feeding of late lactation animals, particularly where there is an ad-lib TMR system, will not only have a negative impact on efficient production but will also drive cows to a BCS of 3.5 or more at the point of drying off, adversely affecting performance in the coming lactation," he warns. "Animals at BCS below 2.5 must be fed to support production as well as live-weight gain to bring them into at least 2.75 at dry off. Producers must body condition score their cows two to three months prior to dry off date," he says.

"And in the dry period ensure that the basics are kept right," he adds. "Far off dry cows require nothing more than ad-lib forage and free access to dry cow minerals, providing they have a BCS of 2.75-3.25.

"Straw will not be essential in the mix for these animals on the majority of this winter's higher fibre silages."

Close up animals should be offered the same forage/forages as early lactation animals, and fed up to 3kg of dry cow concentrates per day to increase the energy density of the diet and compensate for loss of appetite. "This will also prepare the rumen environment for efficient use of concentrates in early lactation," he adds. |