Proactive planni ng for poor silage

What are your options for cost-effective winter rations?

Most producers will have collected more than half of their total winter forage by the end of July, so now is the ideal time to assess stocks and make plans to ensure that your herd's winter requirements will be met as cost effictively as possible.

Initial reports suggest a wide range in both the quality and quantity of grass silage. Producers who took an early first cut may have a smaller crop but quality should be good. Those who waited, or were caught out by the rain, may have more but probably poorer quality forage.

Prospects for second cut have also been dictated by the weather. In some parts of the country growth rates have been adequate, while in areas where rainfall is low crop covers are low and some second-cut fields have been grazed.

"The one thing you can't do is change what you have in the clamp," stresses Biotal's silage product manager Nick Berni. "Producers must accurately assess the value of the feed they have got as soon as possible. And in this way they will keep as many options as possible available to them regarding alternative forages or supplementation."

Mr Berni recommends that clamps should be analysed as soon as is possible to assess the quantities available in each clamp. Producers growing maize should also make a realistic estimate of the likely yield of silage that will be available.

"Armed with this information it is possible to make prudent decisions to help formulate cost effective winter rations. And producers can also make decisions about how best to conserve wheat crops destined for livestock feed."

Wholecrop 'bonus'

Where producers find they are likely to be short of forage, Mr Berni advises making wholecrop silage to provide sufficient total forage. He believes that it can provide high levels of energy combined with high levels of dry matter, which could be a bonus if grass silage dry matter is low. While wholecrop is relatively easy to preserve, he advises the use of an additive as the high starch and sugar contents make it prone to heating.

"For those where the quantity of silage is adequate, there is a real possibility that quality will be down. In these cases it will probably be beneficial to preserve cereals as crimp to provide a high energy and high starch supplement. Also, as the starch in crimped cereals is digested more slowly than ground or rolled cereals, it can be used to increase ? cereal inclusion rates in diets without increasing the risk of acidosis."

As crimping involves combining crops around three weeks earlier than a conventional harvest, Mr Berni emphasises that it is important to make a decision to crimp grain as soon as possible.

"Both wholecrop and crimped cereals are very cost-effective on a DM tonne basis and by assessing forage stocks early it will be possible to make the right decision to help control overall feed costs."

Carrs Billington nutritionist Dan Leedell agrees: "And the wholecrop option is probably even more attractive now since wheat prices have fallen further. They were around £118/tonne in late June – down from £138/tonne at the beginning of the month," he says.

Decision time: harvesting wheat early, as wholecrop, can help to bolster forage stocks

Balancing feeds

For those without a standing crop of wheat as a back-up plan, he suggest taking a closer look at other forage 'balancing' feeds such as maize, brewers' grains and Traffordgold. "Buying in maize silage may be a viable option in some areas. And it's worth talking to your suppliers about feeds such as brewers' grains to find out what's going to be available and if you can forward buy. There may be other co-products come the autumn, but don't wait to find out – do the groundwork now and avoid a last-minute panic."

Now's also the time to think about blends, according to Mr Leedell. Many of his clients are already balancing grazing with a blend that can then be tweaked to complement silage and other winter rations when the herd is re-housed at the end of the season. "Doing this now will help to avoid that yield 'blip' that many producers see when their milking herd moves onto the winter ration.

"And with a milk price rise being offered by many buyers in the autumn, it's a blip that many producers could do without.

"Some planning now will avoid a fall 'stall' and ensure you get the most cost-effective and productive winter ration that your money can buy and your cows will thrive on."

Rachael Porter

Select supplementary feeds to boost performance

Tom Hough: "Think of feeds in terms of the nutrients they provide"

Whatever the quality and type of silage available to form the basis of the diet, the way the ration will perform is influenced by how supplementary feeds are used inside the cow, according to NWF's technical manager Tom Hough.

"When evaluating rations we need to understand what the available feeds provide, what the cow actually needs and when she needs it, and then gauge how she physically performs," he says.

"Different ingredients are utilised in different ways and at variable rates in the rumen and gut depending on factors including genetics, yield level, balance and quality of other feeds, to name but a few. And it is this whole aspect that offers huge potential for improving the way we feed our cows."

The ingredients in the diet are broken down into products called precursors which are then used by the cow. Different precursors are used in different ways and individual feedstuffs produce different balances of precursors. The crucial thing is to provide the optimum supply of precursors in the balance.

It is possible to formulate blends with specific patterns of precursor production to balance the supply from different combinations of forages.

"We need to start thinking of feeds in terms of the group of nutrients they provide the cow. For example, the majority of starch is broken down in the rumen to propionic acid, while a proportion will pass through the rumen intact and be broken down in the gut to glucose. These are described as glucogenic nutrients.

"The passage of protein through the cow produces aminogenic nutrients, while the final nutrients are described as ketogenic, and these include some sugars, cellulose and digestible fat.

"By understanding which precursors will be produced by the fermentation of your mix of silages it is possible to select a blend which will balance the forage, improving rumen synchrony and performance. Optimal digestive performance is the key to efficient production."

Mr Hough suggests that producers who are using diets comprised exclusively of grass silage should look for a blend that will increase the supply of glucogenic precursors. Where a diet is based on large proportions of maize and wholecrop then the requirement will be to balance the diet by providing the correct levels of aminogenic and ketogenic nutrients.