

# Sward savers on a shoe string

Over and reseeded may be cost effective options, despite high input prices

How can you improve and maintain the productivity of your grazing and silage swards on a budget? With rising input prices putting a financial strain on many businesses, we offer some pointers on how to assess, improve and manage your grassland efficiently.

Time taken to assess grassland quality will be time well spent this spring. So says NWF's commercial manager Rupert Stafford.

"2007 saw a difficult grass growing season with the wet weather making grassland management a real challenge," he says. "But this season higher milk prices will mean that producers are keen to make the most of grass, while record fertiliser prices mean they must focus on maximising both grass yields and grazing quality."

Mr Stafford believes that many swards will have been damaged as a result of poaching and waterlogging in 2007. And this will lead to a lower proportion of ryegrasses and a larger population of weed grasses, which will have been quick to colonise any space within the sward.

"Weed grasses will reap havoc with both grazing quality and quantity," explains Mr Stafford. "A good quality grazed ryegrass sward will produce around 12tDM/ha – providing enough energy for 24,000 litres of milk during the grazing the season."

## Worthwhile walk

"But a sward with only 50% perennial ryegrass, with the remainder being weed grasses, will yield up to 2tDM/ha less – the equivalent to enough grass to produce nearly 4,000 litres of milk."

He also stresses that weed grasses are less effective converters of fertiliser into plant material. A 50:50 ryegrass:weed grass sward will use nitrogen fertiliser 35% less efficiently than a pure ryegrass ley and he estimates that, at today's prices, this will cost around £45/ha in lost potential.

"So taking the time to walk fields as soon as possible to assess the quality of the grasses present will be well worthwhile. This will give you a good idea of the proportion of ryegrass in the leys and then you can decide on the action needed to get the most from it." Perennial ryegrass is easily identified as it has a crimson red base. Grasses without this will tend to be less desirable species.

## Seed rate

Mr Stafford advises that if there is more ryegrass than weed species, then the pasture will probably respond to harrowing or rolling to remove ruts, followed by the usual fertiliser applications.

"If the sward is somewhere around 50% ryegrass then consider looking to rejuvenate it by slot seeding or overseeding. A reduced seed rate of around 13kg/ha can be used and at less than £15/ha the cost of the operation is considerably less than a full reseed."

If the sward is less than 50% ryegrass, and certainly if it is below 25%, then he says that a full reseed really is the best option.

"Despite the higher costs associated with a full reseed, there is usually a short pay-back period. A vigorous new ley can produce 25% more DM/ha than a tired mixed-species ley, allowing the establishment costs to be recovered in the first year."

Whether rejuvenating or reseeding it is essential to consider the seed mixture to use. Mr Stafford advises producers to select a mix designed for the use to which the field is primarily put and to



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look to use the new high-sugar varieties to maximise the kilograms of dry matter produced per kilogram of nitrogen applied.

"Consider using a high proportion of clover in any reseeding mixtures.

Fertiliser prices are likely to remain high for the foreseeable future so the benefits of nitrogen-fixing legumes will be even more important."

Rachael Porter

## Save on fertiliser and boost 'bite'

Red clover has seen increased popularity – among organic and conventional producers – in recent years thanks to its nitrogen-fixing ability. And with continuing high fertiliser prices, this trend is set to continue.

Producer Stewart Birse, based near Newton Stewart, became interested in red clover after seeing how, in one year, a nearby organic farm had been able to take five silage cuts of a red-clover blend.

## More 'bite'

Stewart farms conventionally, reseeding fields every seven years. In August 2006, he sowed his usual grass and white clover mixture Turbo and also included the red-clover blend Red Admiral with the aim of saving money on fertiliser, as well as providing more 'bite' for his cows.

Cows were grazed on the new ley from the end of the following March, before it was closed for silage. Having spread 330 cubic metres of slurry per hectare, Stewart took a first cut on 24 May. After this it received only 124kg per hectare of 25:5:5 fertiliser – roughly a quarter of the normal rate – and another 330 cubic metres per hectare of slurry before a second cut was taken in mid-July. Then more slurry was applied and it was grazed through to the end of autumn, with a third cut off a smaller area to 'tidy up' the grass.

"Having red clover in leys is what our grandfathers used to do, so we've come full circle," says Stewart, who plans to step up inclusion of red clover from 2.5kg/hectare to 3kg/hectare this year, and make further cuts on bagged fertiliser use.

"Red clover varieties used to have a reputation for dying out, but with the newer varieties available, leys can last



Red clover leys can last for up to four years

for up to four years," says Lindsay Ker of McGill & Smith Seeds. "And the benefit of using a clover blend is that varieties with different flowering dates are used to provide a consistent yield through the growing season."

Overseeding an existing sward with white clover also has a number of benefits, according to Barenbrug's David Long. "A source of nitrogen, it is an excellent addition to fertiliser and so, with fertiliser prices continuing to escalate, significant savings can be made by sowing white clover to supplement targeted fertiliser usage," he says.

## Improves protein

He adds that nutritional research has also shown that white clover can give a 20% increase in milk yield and also improves milk protein content.

"Overseeding can be carried out from early May to early-September, with late June to mid-August being the best times. And the ideal target level of clover content in the sward is 30% of dry matter – above this level, the proportion of grass is too low and yields are reduced, below this level the clover content is too low to feed maximum grass growth and hence potential yield is lost."