

Better value – not lower price –
keeps feed costs under control

True feed value for your money

Simply opting for the cheapest feeds when sourcing ingredients for buffer and winter rations is not the best way to keep cost under control and maximise milk production. We spoke to two leading nutritionists to find out more.

text **Rachael Porter**

Despite the continuing strength of feed markets, focusing on cost per tonne of freshweight and making critical feed purchasing decisions based on that figure alone is the wrong approach.

So says KW nutritionist Mark Scott. It's a simple and straight forward message that he wants every producer to hear – controlling feed costs comes from using better value feeds and not cheaper ones.

"Producers need an approach based on the nutrient content of the feed, how much value it delivers to the ration, and how that unit cost compares to the alternatives," he explains. "For example, moist feeds typically offer by far and away the best value for money – if Traffordgold is priced at £87/tonne freshweight (FW), this is just £174/tonneDM for a 20% crude protein, 13.4MJ ME/kg DM, 17.5% starch concentrate.

"That's the equivalent of paying £157/tonne for a 90% DM compound, which works out to be a saving of between £60 and £90/tonne at current prices," he says.

But Mr Scott urges producers to go much further than simply looking at cost/tonne DM. "Compare feeds on the basis of cost per unit of energy, protein or other specific nutrients, while also considering the particular characteristics a feed brings to the ration."

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate this point, with a range of common straight

compared on the basis of cost/MJ ME, and a matching graph showing the relative cost/tonne DM. "The best value feeds in terms of energy supply aren't necessarily those that are 'best value' for dry matter."

Promar International's Emma Thompson agrees: "It's easy to be seduced by cheap bulky feeds. Who could resist brewers' grains at £25/tonne? But it's important to look at the feed on a dry matter basis and take into account its energy value, dry matter and protein, and how it's going to fit into your herd's ration. What exactly are you going to replace with it and will it do the same job?"

Home-grown forages

She also stresses that the starting point must always be home-grown forages before you think about buying in anything else. Purchased feeds must complement forages and cost-effective diet formulation starts by getting the most from home-grown feeds "Grass and maize silage and wholecrop wheat, for example, will be among the cheapest and best value feeds available. So understand what your home-grown forages will supply in terms of energy and protein and then are you in a good position to start meaningfully shopping around for additional bought-in feeds.

"When you do, compare feeds on a like for like basis and not just on cost per tonne. The rumen requires a balance of energy sources so consider the starch and fibre levels and determine if the feed will balance with the rest of the ration? Don't

just buy feeds in isolation, just because they appear to represent value for money.

"In just eight or 10 weeks you could be paying the true price of feeding a 'cheap' feed if there's a negative knock-on effect on herd fertility, for example, because the ration has been compromised. You could be looking at cows that aren't bulling or holding to service," she adds. "Another good example is the high quality rumen-bypass protein that's vital in supporting high yields and cow health," Mr Scott adds.

Also called digestible undegraded protein (DUP), comparing the options on the basis of DUP supply shows that the rumen-bypass protein supplements are more cost-effective than soyabean meal.

It's also important to take into account the impact a feed has on rumen fermentation, balancing home-grown feeds or meeting a specific requirement of the cow. The quickly available energy

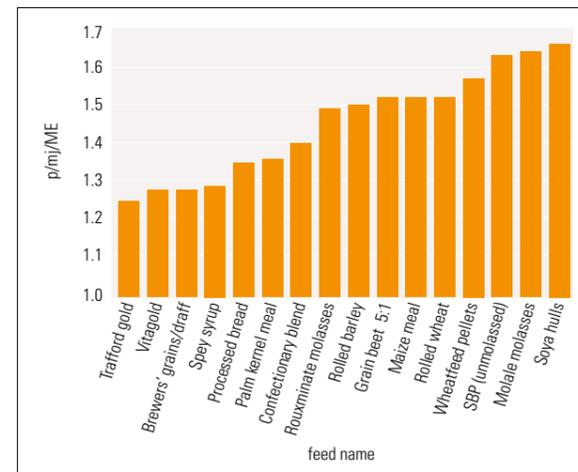


Figure 1: Comparison of feeds on a cost per unit of energy basis

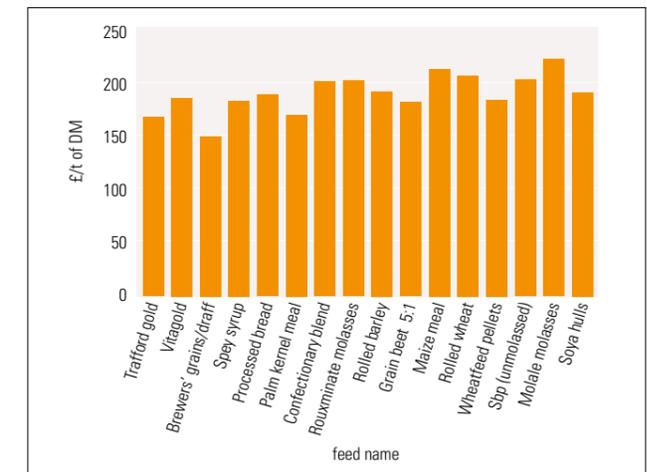


Figure 2: Comparison of feeds on a cost per unit of dry matter basis

supplied by starch or sugars that helps to drive milk yield has a different role in the ration than rumen buffering digestible fibre or caustic-treated wheat, for example. Bread waste, for example, will ferment extremely quickly, so it must be

balanced with a slower release starch and some rumen buffering feeds. "Make sure you're comparing like-with-like, or at least taking into account the value a feed brings to the ration outside its nutrient content," he says.

Ensure that any feeds you buy in complement your herd's ration

A similar challenge exists when assessing feeds that supply both energy and protein. What the figures in table 1 don't show is that due to the high energy supply in bio-ethanol wheat distillers' feed relative to its protein content, using it to directly replace a 55:45 mix of soyabean meal and wheat will typically save the equivalent of between £30 and £50/tonne.

Be flexible

"So don't overlook 'non-traditional' sources and develop a flexible feeding system to utilise feeds that are the best value at the time," says Mr Scott.

"High-protein liquid feeds can often supply protein more cost-effectively than rapemeal, and offer extra metabolisable energy. Also, moist feeds are a better value source of energy than dry concentrates and distillers' feeds contain high quality protein that can help replace traditional protein meals," adds Mr Scott. "Just make sure you compare feeds on the basis of their true cost before making any buying decisions."

Ms Thompson says that there aren't many 'cheap' feeds around at the moment. "In the east, you may find apple pumice, citrus pulp, vegetable waste and potatoes at an attractive price. In Scotland it might be brewers' and distillers' grain. But again it's important when buying co-products to remember that quality and nutritional values can be variable. Be prepared to have loads analysed. Look at dry matter and other nutritive values and make sure they fit in with your ration before signing the delivery slip.

"There's only so much dry matter a cow can eat in one day, so make sure whatever you buy is making a valuable contribution to her diet and it's not just filling her up with fibre and water." |

