

How much milk is available from poorer quality second-cut silage?

Will second cut make the grade?

Many producers are facing a winter with a clamp full of silage that is of questionable quality. There are first cuts that meet the criteria for good milk production, but quantity is an issue. Not the perfect start to winter. So we spoke to a nutritionist and a couple of producers to compare notes on forage.

text Allison Matthews

Variable silage quality is proving to be a real challenge at feed out for many producers who are looking to achieve reasonable milk yields this coming winter. But it's a challenge that producers can meet, according to Thompson's dairy nutritionist James Black. "Silage with a D value of 60, and 10MJ/kg dry matter with 10% crude protein, will be what many milk producers are faced with on their silage analysis report. Balancing this material correctly and feeding it alongside expensive concentrates will be crucial to ensure that freshly calved cows perform well this winter."

Producer Mark Blelock shares his own experience of the poor summer. "We fed second-cut silage as a buffer feed during August to ensure adequate quantities of first cut and wholecrop wheat would be available for the winter. Milk levels on higher yielding cows dropped by between four and five litres, even with increased feed rates."

Table 1: 2012 grass silage analysis for first and second cut

	first cut	second cut
dry matter (%)	28.5	27.7
pH	4.1	4.1
NH ₃ N (% total N)	8	7.2
crude protein (% DM)	11.9	11
M.E (MJ/kg DM)	11.1	10.6
D value	70	66
silage intake potential	93	86

"Thankfully we are now onto first cut, cows are calving and the whole herd is back to above a daily average of 30 litres. Second cut will be fed to dry cows and young stock."

The rumen requires active bugs to breakdown forage and concentrate into a simple structure for the cow to use. To ensure the bugs are mobilised, readily fermentable energy sources such as starch and sugars must be available, which are used to break down the fibrous material in the forage.

Microbial activity

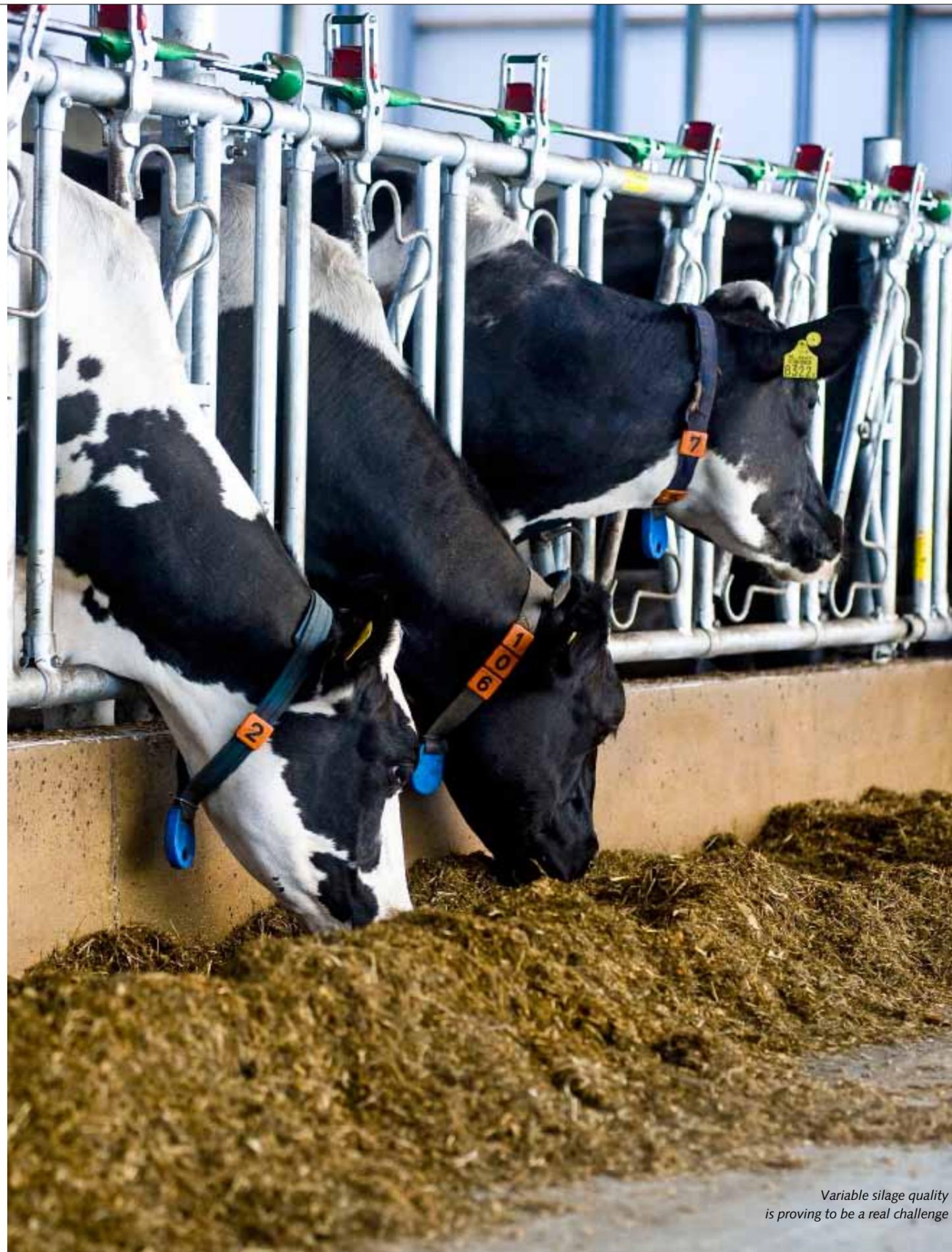
Mr Black warns that the requirement for rumen degradable protein is essential to maintain microbial activity and to ensure that good rumen function is maintained. "Low-protein diets will quite often result in stiff manure and poor fibre breakdown if they are not balanced correctly."

"Soya, irrespective of price, will be needed for both its rumen degradable and bypass qualities. Do not skimp on high-quality protein because it makes the blend price expensive. Cheaper rations could prove costly in the long run this year."

For those producers who have excellent quality first-cut silage, as shown in Table 1, achieving the desired levels of milk production will not be an issue.

But for those feeding second-cut silage similar to that in Table 1, or possibly worse than the average, there's a challenge.

"Dry matter intake will be critical to try



Variable silage quality is proving to be a real challenge

and sustain yields of more than 40 litres. This type of forage is 'low intake' to start with and then, when it is in the rumen, it is sluggish to say the least.

All raw materials included in the blend or cake should have a purpose. A range of fermentable material, including molasses, cereals and sugar beet pulp, should be fed to help utilise the fibre contained within the silage. "Ground maize has not been affected by local weather conditions and should be considered for its bypass starch," adds Mr Black.

Eye-watering levels

"Wholecrop cereals will also help with this material, but be conscious of the level of fibre in the total mix. Some of the cereal inclusion levels will be 'eye watering' and it is a matter of finding the limit without compromising rumen health.

"Wet, fibrous second cut needs treated with care and high levels of fermentable energy should not be included without the advice of a reputable nutritionist. Get your diets wrong this winter and LDAs, sore feet and poor performance will be all too common," he says.

Producer Neil Pepper acknowledges the merits of increasing feed rates on second-cut silage in order to sustain milk yields. "We held cows for longer in the freshly-calved group where total TMR intakes are naturally lower, and increased feed rates through the parlour. Cows that had the potential to achieve 50 litres have gone on to do so."

Although feed rates are higher per cow per day in this situation, feed rate per litre has actually dropped as the cows are achieving their potential.

Previously cows were struggling to achieve the yield they were being fed for and were not efficient. Efficient milk production can be described as litres that give the best return on the operating costs of the individual business.

But, as Mr Black points out, this does not necessarily mean that maximum litres will mean maximum profit.

"Marginal litres will be chased on many units this winter as bulk tank levels struggle to match those seen in 2011. With this in mind, be careful not to produce inefficient litres just for the sake of production.

"Analyse silage and keep checking performance against feed levels. Re-analyse the clamp if figures are not adding up," he says.

"It is going to be a troublesome winter, but keep an eye on nutrition and performance should be maintained." |