

Look at silage quality now to avoid winter production trouble

Take stock of forage

A timely look at forage quality should give producers plenty of time to whip out their calculators and do a few cost-saving sums to ensure that this coming winter is a profitable one.

text **Rachael Porter**

The 2013 silage season got off to a difficult start, following a late and cold spring, so KW nutritionist Mark Scott is urging milk producers to pay close attention to potential silage quality this year. He says that overestimating nutrient supply from forage can quickly undermine milk yields during the winter, and result in higher feed costs as well as reduced production.

“Milk production suffered across the country in winter 2012/2013 as poorer than expected forage failed to provide the nutrients needed. In many cases, yields were below target for the entire winter,” he says.

“The signs are already there to suggest that this year might well pose similar challenges in terms of forage quality, so it’s vital we learn the lessons from last winter and re-adjust winter feeding plans accordingly.”

More mature

This year, the late spring meant a slow start to grass growth and the vast majority of the country took first-cut silage at least a couple of weeks later than normal. Although the swards being cut looked ‘normal’, Mr Scott says the likelihood was that grass was probably more mature than it appeared.

“Regardless of when spring growth starts, heading dates for most grass varieties remain remarkably static,” he explains. “The grass reacts to a shortened growing season by moving to maturity quicker, with the aim of producing seed at as close to the normal time as possible.

“It means that a three-week delay to the start of growth in the spring might only delay heading by a week, if that. The result is that even if silage is cut just two weeks later than normal, the

grass is already more mature than you might expect.”

And the effect tends to run on through the rest of the growing season. A shortened window for regrowth leads to further delays if producers are waiting for grass volumes to catch up, and all subsequent silage cuts are either more mature, lower in volume, or both.

“The other big challenge in these situations – as we saw in winter 2012 – is that forage analysis results can sometimes ‘overestimate’ feed value,” Mr Scott adds. “Regardless of how good the grass looked going into the clamp, make sure you get silage analysed and be prepared to make adjustments once you start feeding it out.”

Silage analysis

Kite Consulting nutritionist Tim Davies agrees that reduced quality may be an issue on some units and he’s urging producers to test their silage now. “Some producers did delay taking first cut because yields were looking low. And this may have compromised quality. So best to get in and check this now – rather than later.”

He says that silage can be tested just a week after being ensiled. “You’ll get a good indication of what you have in the clamp and, when you know what you have, you can start to plan for any short falls.”

Typically he’s seeing silages analysing at around 10.2ME with a D value of 66. “Some are worse, so quality is an issue this year. That said, some of my clients have taken an excellent quality first cut, but then their volumes may be down a little. Some are reporting being 10% down on quantity, which is a worry as silage stocks are already low on many units.”

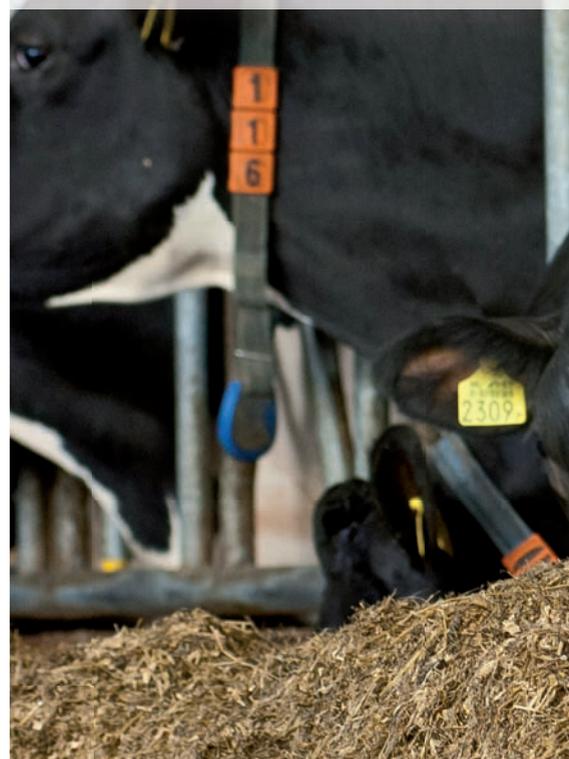
The key to minimising the potential impact of low stocks or poorer quality is to adapt winter feeding strategies early. If

a large amount of poor quality silage is made nationally, additional feed secured now may cost much less than if bought once winter arrives, clamps are opened and demand increases, according to Mr Scott. “In just about all cases this year, forward contract prices are lower than current spot prices, and often lower even than last winter’s prices,” he continues. “But we’re also in a situation where some of the best value feeds may sell out fast, so quick action is important.

“If the price is right, don’t be afraid to book forward contracts right through to May 2014 to cover requirements until after spring turnout.”

More mature forages will need additional fermentable energy to help drive the rumen this winter, with sugars from molasses-based liquid feeds and starch from rolled wheat or biscuit meals among the best value options currently available. Liquid feeds will also help to lift feed intakes, which was a critical factor in maintaining yields last winter.

“Consider the distillery syrups like Spey Syrup to supply any extra rumen degradable protein that might be missing, and use cost-effective rumen-bypass protein supplements to minimise the need for expensive soya bean meal when fine tuning protein supply.



There's an app for that!

Producers looking to make the most of a good maize growing season will be using the latest technology to determine the best harvest date for their crops and ensure that this year's maize silage ticks all the boxes in terms of quality, as well as yield.

So Limagrain, in partnership with CowManagement, has developed and launched an app to help producers assess their maize crop and calculate an optimal harvest date, while in the field, in around five minutes.

The free app is available to download for iPhone and Android smartphone users. The app takes into consideration the current dry matter of the whole plant, as well as the starch maturity of cob, in conjunction with the weather forecast to calculate an estimated optimal harvest date.

Limagrain's Tim Richmond explains

that because 50% of a maize crop's potential, in terms of both yield and energy, is achieved only as the crop reaches maturity during the final few weeks before harvest, it is vital to harvest at the correct date to avoid missing out.

"Some producers feel under pressure from contractors, who want to harvest a crop when it suits them and not necessarily at a time that will maximise energy and dry matter yield.

"This app gives some of that control back to the producer, as well as advance warning of the ideal harvest time.

"We want growers to get the best results from their crop. Growing maize requires a considerable amount of investment and this ensures that harvest isn't rushed or delayed and that producers can maximise their return on their considerable effort," he says.



"Focus on balancing metabolisable protein supply, not just crude protein, and aim to make the high yielders and early lactation cows a priority when it comes to the best quality forage."

Don't panic

Mr Davies is up beat about the coming winter and his advice to producers is to hold back on forward buying on some feeds. "There's certainly no need to panic. Just make sure you do a thorough stock

take of what you have in the clamp after adjusting for the higher dry matter – first cuts appear to be much drier at 34% – and keep an eye on the feed markets."

He says that maize crops are looking good. "So that should bolster supplies of good quality forage on many units. And feed prices have eased, with cereals at between £150 and £160 per tonne and still falling. Wheat is coming off the combine at around £155 at the moment, and could fall to £150 per tonne by

November." He adds that feed prices should ease from October onwards on the back of huge global crops of maize grain, wheat, soya, and rape seed from Russia, the US and Europe.

"There will be a time lag, but they will come down on the back of good World harvests, and this will then have a knock on effect on things such as beet pulp, distillers' grains and co products. So watch the markets and wait for prices to ease before booking too far forward." |

