

Keeping inputs and outputs on track is key to maximising profit this winter

# Feed your profit margins

If ever there was a year to boost intakes and output, this is it. So how do producers achieve this without falling into nutritional pot holes? We asked a nutritionist and a vet to explain how the road to driving intakes can be a bit straighter and a lot less bumpy.

text **Allison Matthews**

**T**here is a large variation in silage quality and many cows have a 'light' condition score, so the obvious answer is to increase feed rates, particularly with the current milk price to concentrate

ratio. But if the overall diet isn't managed it can lead to problems at farm level that will eat away at profit margins. Alleviating negative energy balance (NEB) by maximising both forage and

concentrate intakes is vital if this is going to be a successful winter, explains Thompsons' dairy nutritionist Mary-Jane Robinson.

"Although the target for daily forage intake per cow is 12kg, many producers are struggling to achieve 10kg with poor quality silage pulling that figure down to 8.5kg in many cases.

One kilogramme of dry matter can have the financial benefit of an extra two litres of milk and, considering the current milk price, any additional litres would significantly help the milk cheque."

Forage quality will drive intakes and on

*Dairy diet: forage quality is driving intakes on many UK units*



many units it will act as rumen fill with cows being fed concentrates up to 0.45kg per litre to push performance. It has an important role, but as Ms Robinson points out there is more to managing silage than just balancing it in the diet. "Many first cuts are indicating high dry matters, which can prove slightly problematic in terms of heating. With wide clamp faces, silo control is important."

### Potential problems

In between getting silage analysed, producers should monitor how silage looks and smells as they work through the clamp. This gives a good indication of any potential problems. In terms of cow environment, feed bunkers should allow for 60cm per cow and be cleaned out on a regular basis to ensure producers are constantly supplying fresh silage and maximising intakes."



Mary-Jane Robinson: "There's more to managing silage than just balancing rations"

Unfortunately the buck doesn't stop with the silage and, as large animal vet Aurélie Moralis explains, there can be many unseen bumps in the road that get in the way of boosting intakes.

"Sub-clinical parasite burdens, such as liver fluke and gut worm, will reduce the cow's appetite and feed intake. This will impact on milk yield, composition, body condition score and fertility.

"Fluke infection can reduce milk yield by as much as 8% and increase the calving interval by more than four days. A bulk tank analysis is a good starting point to design a parasite control plan by measuring antibody levels in the milk. It can be used in conjunction with faecal samples and details of liver condemnation to draw up a complete picture. The vet can then advise on the appropriate treatment required."

### Balancing energy

If producers are at a point where intakes should be maximised Ms Robinson explains the technical reasons why selecting a glucogenic compound, which is balanced through the TMR with a blend, will make the best use of the silage available. "Glucogenic nutrients are derived from propionic acid, digestible by-pass starch, and unused protein. Maize is an excellent glucogenic raw material and, with current cereal prices encouraging the use of more starch this year, it is advantageous if the total diet is balanced."

Benefits include increased energy balance and reduced fat mobilisation, which reduces non-esterified fatty acids (NEFAs), blood  $\beta$ -hydroxybutyrate (BHBA) and triacylglycerol (TAG) in the liver. This also contributes to an improvement in fertility. "By working with your vet and blood sampling a small proportion of cows for a metabolic profile, producers can get an insight into the energy status of fresh cows."

The vet may also be required to identify



Aurélie Moralis: "Fluke infection can reduce milk yield by as much as 8%"

viral infections, such as IBR and BVD, which can also impact on farm profitability. "IBR is a respiratory virus that can lead to a sudden milk drop in lactating dairy cows. An underlying BVD problem with the possibility of persistently infected (PI) animals in the herd will hold the cows back from reaching their full potential. Vaccination, as well as removing PIs from the herd, will have a major impact on overall health," says Ms Moralis.

### Take control

Dry cow management undoubtedly impacts on subsequent lactations. Assessing body condition scores 16 weeks prior to calving and ensuring they will be hitting between 2.75 and 3.25 is all part of managing an eight-week dry period. "The transition period – both the close-up dry period and early lactation – are vital to try and maximise dry matter intakes from forage, with the critical period 21 days pre and post calving," adds Ms Robinson.

"Feeding concentrates during the close-up dry period, when the calf is taking up more space, allows requirements to be met but also acclimatises the rumen papillae to starch, which can reduce the risk of acidosis post calving.

"In early lactation, building up concentrates during an 18-day period can minimise the risk of metabolic diseases such as clinical acidosis, SARA and displaced abomasum.

"Feed space in the dry period should be increased to 75cm per cow to optimise dry matter intakes from forage," she says.

"The emphasis this winter must be on maximising litres profitably. Producers must balance nutrition with herd health by using tools, such as monthly milk recording, to give a foundation for the nutritionist and vet to work from and make educated and informed suggestions for improvement." |