

Base grazing decisions on the bigger picture – not just tradition

Use your head at turnout



Many producers are ruled by their hearts when it comes to turnout. Tradition is often the basis of management decisions, rather than nutritional and milk production considerations.

We spoke to two leading nutritionist to find out more.

text **Allison Matthews**

Cows are being turned out across the country as weather conditions continue to improve. But are we using up-to-date systems that enhance profitability? Or are management decisions being based on the tradition that turnout is a high point in the producer calendar?

Thompsons' nutritionist Mary-Jane Robinson acknowledges producers' instinct to get cows out to grass, but in some cases questions the motivation.

"Poor grassland management can have an impact on swards and the amount of milk that grazed grass can produce," she says. Figure 1 shows that milk from forage yields from monitored herds are well below what is expected. "Unfortunately many producers have a preconception that grass can sustain in excess of 20 litres, meaning cows are underfed as the nutritional value of the grazed grass is overestimated.

"The management of grass can cause additional work, but benefits are achievable if a paddock plan is put in place and managed accordingly."

Rotation length and stocking rates are important and in a previous Cow-Management article financial consultant Jason McMinn discussed how a 200-cow

herd can be accommodated on the same land as 150 cows, assuming the housing and parlour can cope.

"While we should not discount this information as soon as the sun comes out, we must take time to assess everything we know about our capabilities and make sure decisions are based on that," says Ms Robinson.

"In the early grazing period, rotation length should be no more than 20 days, extending to 25 days as the season progresses. Stocking rates during this same period need to be at least five cows per hectare, reducing to four cows by mid-to-late summer.

"As more producers go with their heads, not their hearts, we have seen a trend towards partial or totally housed systems, with weather, land prices and available ground to rent all having an impact on decision making," says Ms Robinson.

Management matters

"But irrespective of the system it is the management within it that really matters. Realistic feeding, according to both the stage of lactation and the capabilities of the grass, is central in maximising profit." Studies have shown that flat rate feeding from May to September equates to the same amount of concentrate usage when cows are fed to yield (see Table 1).

"As a guide, if the top third of the herd peaks above 33 litres and weather conditions are poor then grazing may not be the place for these cows to maximise litres, hold body condition score and ensure fertility is not compromised.

"Cows at this level of performance would be best suited to a completely housed ration," says Ms Robinson.

"For herds where computerised parlours are not in place, and to avoid the batching of cows, the use of tail taping is a simple approach to allow the top up of cows in the parlour, depending on the stage of lactation."

She adds that low yielders cost more to feed in a housed system and inefficient use of feed can usually be blamed on

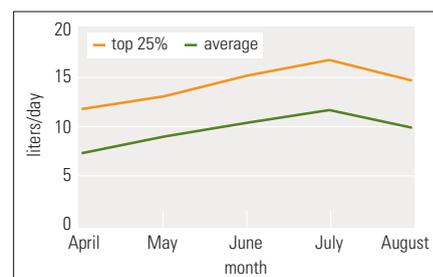


Figure 1: Milk from forage (2013) based on Thompsons' Milk Manager data

this batch of cows if they are over-fed. A reasonable level of concentrates and high quality grass will maintain the yield of these cows to match that of mid to late lactation animals.

Buffer feeding

"In periods of wet weather it may be necessary to increase the concentrate feed level by one or two kilogrammes until grass dry matter intakes increase," she stresses.

"The use of buffer feeding, particularly in mid- or late-lactation cows, should be a last resort, with forage substituting grass intake both in real terms and time spent grazing.

"The use of concentrates should be the first choice as they offer less substitution of grass while improving nutrient intake as seen in Table 2."

As Zinpro's ruminant manager Jonathan Huxtable explains, balancing the diet at this time of the year can also prove difficult.

"In addition to trying to maximise the use of grazed grass, balancing the cow's requirements in terms of protein and energy and mineral requirements can be a challenge.

"Minerals at grass can have an impact on animal performance and a recent study – which fed zinc, manganese, copper and cobalt in the form of Availa 4 protected minerals – found that cows produced more energy and fat-corrected milk than control cows," adds Mr Huxtable.

"Potential grazing platforms, the quality of swards, the accessibility of fields and the existing housing and parlour all need to be considered before deciding the plan of action for the summer months," says Ms Robinson.

"When this is balanced with what the producer expects from milk yield and quality the best system will be apparent.

"Potentially the difference between good and poor grazing can equate to a loss of five litres if the diet is not manipulated to compensate. Improving the performance of forage will ultimately improve profitability." |

Table 1: Flat rate versus feeding to yield

concentrate allocation	flat rate feeding	fed to yield
May	5.2kg	up to 10kg
July	3.7kg	up to 7kg
September	3.0kg	up to 5kg
total conc/cow	480kg	480kg

Data from trial with herd calving mid December and a yield range of between 22 litres and 47 litres. Group average yield was 31 litres/day at grass (source AFBI).

Table 2: Effect of buffer feeding on full grass-based systems

supplement	grass DM intake	grazing time	additional ME intake
grass silage	0.78	36mins	1.6 MJ
maize silage	0.67	26mins	3.2 MJ
whole crop	0.44	24mins	4.0 MJ
concentrate	0.17	14mins	11.0 MJ