

Quality grazing and conserved

# Early start makes

We take a close look at two 190-cow herds that are both run on similar systems, with the same staffing levels and comparable output, and find out how grassland management plays a key role in their differing levels of farm profit.

text **Rachael Porter**

**T**ake two units, comparable in every way except for profitability, and there's an unmissable opportunity to really learn how to improve the bottom line. So says LIC UK's consultant Piers Badnell, adding that the difference between two very similar units, which he has worked closely with, is the result of better forage utilisation.

"The two herds, which will remain anonymous, provide a real insight into just how much of a difference forage management and utilisation can make when it comes to either realising a profit or a loss – even in this current tough economic climate," he says. "In fact, the unit that wasn't performing so well has already improved by implementing some of the management approaches gleaned from the unit with the higher comparable farm profit," he adds. "And it's a model that could make a huge difference to units all over the UK this coming season."

## One difference

The units he looked at are, indeed, very similar in terms of farmed area, cow numbers (around 190 milkers), and staffing. Both are run by two brothers and one full-time employee. The type/breed of cow on the units are also the same and both are averaging around 7,900 litres, sold on the same milk contract and with similar calving patterns. "One is calved in a tight autumn block and the other in an autumn/winter block," Mr Badnell says.

The two units are also fairly close geographically, with similar soil types (some very heavy and some on the medium/heavier side), topography and climate. "To all intents and purposes, they are almost identical except for one major difference – their comparable farm profit. One is excellent and has been consistently good during the past ten years, whereas the other is, unfortunately, not so good."

The good news for the less profitable unit is that improvements can be made, with relatively little



forage are key to profitability

# all the difference



*First bite: the more profitable unit utilises grass, typically, two weeks earlier than the other herd and this really does make a big difference to profitability*

investment, to bring the CFP in line with the 'better' unit.

The first step is to identify the differences that make one unit so much more profitably than the other. "And a close look revealed that it comes down to one key thing – the quality of forage and the producers' ability to grow and utilise it. Their faith/trust in what quality forage can do also makes a huge difference," he adds.

So how does the one farm use forage to drive profit so efficiently? "The basis of this is quality, quantity, preparation, targets and protocols. On the more profitable unit, a silage ME target of 11.5MJ/kg is achieved in most years and nothing with an ME below 11MJ/kg has been produced during the past decade, including grass silage, whole crop and maize. And grazing is rotational and managed well to produce quality leaf and in excess of 12MJ/kg ME.



*Piers Badnell: "The higher profit herd takes a targeted approach to grassland management"*

"Forage yields are high too. For example, first-cut grass silage is taken two weeks earlier than the neighbouring farm and this means that the quality is higher. Because the cut is taken earlier, yield may be marginally lower than if it was cut at the more traditional time. But the earlier cut means that it is also earlier on the growth curve, so afterwards regrow quicker and 'better' and, as a result, second cuts offer higher yields and quality. So, overall, this unit produces better quality silage and more of it."

## **Timely cut**

The other advantage of cutting earlier than neighbouring units is that competition for the contractor is reduced, so they are better able to pick and choose when they cut. This producer has a meeting with their contractor early in the year to discuss their requirements and potential timings.

"The 'second part' to this quantity story is that they maximise the quantity of quality forage eaten by their cows," adds Mr Badnell. "The aim throughout the year is to get cows to eat between 16 and 17kgDM of forage per cow per day – be that grass during the grazing season and or silage while housed.



*Best of both worlds: an early first cut ensures consistently good quality silage – and plenty of yield for the rest of the season*

“During the housed period the troughs are never empty. The brothers who manage the unit say that if they become empty that will cost them between one and 1.75 litres of milk per cow per day.” Between 4kg and 5kg of concentrate is fed in the parlour at peak production, but no more. “The cows’ remaining requirement for maintenance and yield comes from forage.”

Mr Badnell stresses that it is all very well producing quality forage: “But the cows also need the opportunity to eat large quantities of it, which means plenty of available time – and space. ‘Escape routes are also important so heifers and cows of lower social hierarchy are able to have maximum time at the trough.”

### **Forage utilisation**

The difference in forage utilisation between the units is also highlighted by the contrast in bought-in concentrates. The more profitable herd’s stands at 1.25t/cow and the other at 3.1t/cow. “At a cost of £200/t, that alone is a £370 per cow difference. Not only does the lower CFP herd fail to produce consistently good quality silage, but it also fails to challenge the cow on what has been produced, resulting in a greater reliance on concentrate feed.”

Data from AHDB Dairy Milkbench suggests that an extra 1p spent on feed per litre has an effect on total cost of production of between 1.3ppl and 1.6ppl due to the costs associated with feeding

extra feed, such as diesel, labour and machinery costs.

Back to the difference between a good and an average farming business, one unit is prepared for opportunities and this comes back to planning. If the swards have cover on them in January and conditions are good, cows will go out for a few hours in the morning. The brothers say this is worth between £40 and £60 per day. By contrast, their neighbours would not think about turning cows out until April. “Their cow tracks are by no means ideal or extensive, but what they do have they utilise fully. “Preparation is key here and this includes having fertiliser ordered and delivered in plenty of time, including silage additives and sheets, so that when the weather windows appear they are ready. Nothing too radical here but, as one of the brothers says: ‘I always like to have my ducks set up in a row’,” says Mr Badnell.

### **Set targets**

There are also some basic targets that the two brothers set for their more profitable unit, which rarely change year on year. These include applying fertiliser at the correct time and using slurry where possible and trusting its worth. They have taken samples of slurry in the past by stirring the pit thoroughly and then taking a number of samples to get a good sample.

“It’s worth noting that if your management system stays roughly the

same then the analysis of your slurry will remain the same.” Forage quality targets are set as a ‘no debate’, as well as 5,000 litres of milk from forage. “Concentrating on quality and quantity of forage in the diet is vital. Get this right and milk yield will follow,” adds Mr Badnell.

“The higher CFP herd also has a routine that works and they stick to it. There’s no silage feeding if there is enough grazing, dry cows are grazed on a field near the house that has never had fertilizer or been used as a dumping ground for slurry.”

The brothers are basically prepared when it comes to forage management and reseeding is also integral to maintaining productive swards for cutting and grazing. They have a plan and it’s flexible – it can be tweaked if and when necessary – and they’re prepared to spend money on their swards to get a greater return.

But Mr Badnell stresses that it’s the two-week head start on silage making that really makes the difference between the two businesses. “Added to this is faith in the forage and challenging it with the right cow. The other lower CFP business produces lower yields and starts its grass silage/grazing season too late.

“Quality is lower, as a result, and they struggle to make the most of their grazing and silage swards for the rest of the season, which is why their fall-back position depends on expensive bought-in feed.” |