

Zero grazing means lower feed and forage costs

Cost control with zero grazing

An increasing number of producers are moving to zero grazing systems and are successfully reaping the benefits of reduced feed costs and producing more milk from forage.

text **Emily Ball**

Reducing feed costs was at the root of the decision to zero graze the 150-cow Hydaway herd of pedigree Holsteins, based at Harleston near Tamworth in Staffordshire, in 2015 and Steve Hill and his family have seen the benefits across the board.

“Cows are housed all year round for biosecurity reasons and to keep the robot busy, and we cannot afford to feed a winter ration every day of the year at these low milk prices,” says Steve. “So, in May 2015, we made the decision to move to zero grazing and have made significant savings on both our feed costs and silage costs as a results.”

Steve, who runs the herd with three generations of his family at Acacia Grove Farm, made the move to robotic milking seven years ago and sell 50 fresh-calved

heifers and 30 breeding bulls from the herd each year. The cows, which have an average yield of 30 litres per day, are fed 5kg of ForFarmers’ dairy compound in the robot per day, 16kg of maize, and harvested grass to appetite.

Cost saving

The higher protein available in the young grass has been one of the largest cost savings associated with the move to zero grazing. “Now we don’t buy any protein blend for nine months of the year,” explains Steve. “In summer 2015 we saved around £4,000 a month.”

Steve and his son Tom work closely with ForFarmers’ Roger Marley, to balance the zero grass with the appropriate concentrate feed. “We’ve pretty much halved contractor costs as well, as we’ve



Rod MacBean installed two robotic milkers in 2010

taken silage cuts down from four to two. In 2015 we zero grazed until November 20 and started again this year in March. We simply don’t need the amount of silage we did,” explains Steve.

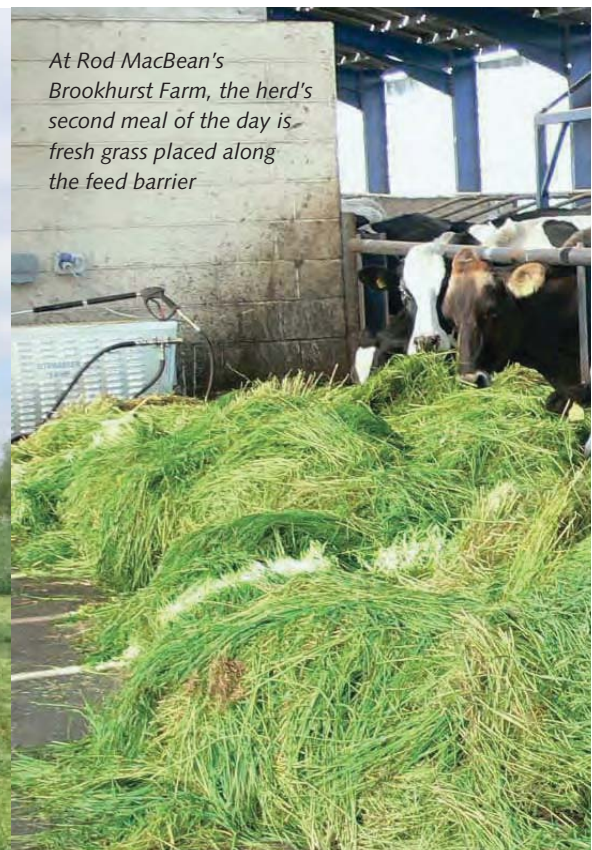
The Hill family use a zero grazer machine: “The grass isn’t processed or crushed and stacked like it is when you use a mower and forage wagon,” says Tom. “We make sure we don’t lose any of the quality in the grass that we put in front of the cows.

“We can also use our grass to manipulate milk quality and maintain the parameters of our milk buyer’s A and B

Silage cuts at Acacia Grove Farm have been reduced from four to two



At Rod MacBean’s Brookhurst Farm, the herd’s second meal of the day is fresh grass placed along the feed barrier



contract. We are now penalised for sending milk with butterfat below 3.8% and have managed this by, at times, feeding slightly older and longer grass to help hit butterfat targets, and to stop sending any 'B' litres away. Then, if we need to add some extra volume, we can feed shorter and leafier grass to increase yields. It gives us flexibility within the system," he explains.

Fresh grass

Adopting zero grazing and adding fresh grass to his herd's TMR has enabled one Shropshire-based producer to increase milk from forage and reduce feed costs. Rod MacBean milks 200 cows, with an average yield of 7,800 litres per year, at Brookhurst Farm, in Wem near Shrewsbury. He installed two Fullwood Merlin robot milkers on a greenfield site in 2010. Rod has been zero grazing since adding the robots, deciding early on to bring the grass to the cows rather than paying for silage making and storage. The cows are split into three groups. Two groups have access to a robot each, the 55 fresh calvers and a mid-lactation group of about 65, which also has access to a loafing paddock. These two groups are both zero grazed. The third group, comprising cows at the end of lactation, graze and are milked through the unit's old manual parlour.

"We do find that the cows can get a bit lazy with the robots towards the end



The availability of grass on Rod MacBean's unit is measured using a plate meter

of their lactation so the final group is very handy," explains Rod. "There is also, occasionally, a cow that simply will not get on with the robot and the grazing group allows us to keep her in the herd." Rod and his team cut the grass for zero grazing at about 11am each day, but can delay if the weather is really wet. The grass is feed out to the cows twice a day. The first feed forms part of a TMR, with each cow receiving 12kg of grass, 2kg of hay and 1kg of straw to manage dry matter, fibre content and butterfat. It

also contains 6kg of brewers' grains and 2kg of a bespoke ForFarmers' blend. The grass is the final ingredient to be added to the mixer wagon, in order to preserve its chop length. This grass has been harvested the day before and is left to wilt until it is fed out the next morning. For the second feed of the day, fresh grass is placed down the feed barrier with the grab.

Great flexibility

Rod works also with Roger Marley to manage the cow ration: "Roger knows what we are trying to achieve here. We work on the diet together and he suggests possible feeds that we can try, using the TMR, giving us great flexibility and cost control," says Rod. "Mixing some of the grass in with the TMR gives the cows that complete diet and enables us to control exactly what the cows are eating. Roger has helped us manage the quality and availability of grass by using a plate meter measuring tool.

"Although the zero grazing cows are split into two groups, in order to manage the robots and loafing area, we also feed a ForFarmers' dairy compound, on an individual cow basis, via the robots and out-of-parlour feeders. It's an accurate way of feeding and makes sure we can eliminate waste. We also cut 95% of our grass field area in May and still cut 95% in October, we don't suffer the wastage associated with rejection sites." |

