

## Reaping the rewards from moving to a multi-cut approach

# Multi-cut converts

For one Dorset-based dairy business, taking a multi-cut approach has resulted in a 5% increase in milk produced from forage in just 12 months. And it has also helped to lay the foundations for further efficiency gains in the future.

text **James Marshall**

**R**unning a successful multi-cut silaging system takes hard work, commitment and attention to detail, but it has its rewards. So say brothers Spencer and Ralph Mogridge, who switched to multi-cut silaging in 2017 in a bid to improve their milk from forage. “I visited the Netherlands to see how producers were taking smaller, more frequent cuts and making a lot of high quality grass silage,” says Spencer. “We felt that a similar approach would work well, in conjunction with our paddock-based grazing system, so we gave it a go. The results have been fantastic and we are already feeding 1.5 kg of concentrate less per cow than we were in 2016/2017

because grass silage yield and quality is so good.”

Spencer and Ralph run a 180-cow herd, on 112 hectares, at Thornton Farm in Sturminster Newton, Dorset. The herd is averaging 9,000 litres, at 4.4% butterfat and 3.4% protein, and milk is sold to cheese makers Barbers.

Cows are fed a TMR, all year round, comprising 7.5kg of blend, 0.5kg of straw, maize silage and plenty of grass silage. “We don’t change this ration throughout the year, which keeps the cows’ rumen environment consistent and helps with feed utilisation,” says Spencer. “Cows are turned out as early as possible in the spring and rotationally

graze, with seven grazing blocks in place that are grazed for a day at a time.

“We bring the cows in at night to maintain good feed intakes, as well as making it easy for us to collect the cows for the morning milking at 2.30am.”

The brothers’ focus has always been on maximising milk from forage and this is the main reason behind adopting a multi-cut approach. “We decided to aim for five cuts of silage in the 2017 season, but we were aware that extra work and initial expense would be required to make this work,” explains Spencer. “In order to get more out of our silage leys, we knew that managing leys correctly and making sure that they were receiving the right inputs would be vital.”

### Soil analysis

Spencer sought advice from ForFarmers’ forage specialist Chris Woodget. “He suggested that we analyse the soil of all the silage leys, so we had a good understanding of the mineral and nutrient content of the soil and its general composition. We could then

*Quality forage: milkers enjoying their ration at Thornton Farm*





Chris Woodget (left) and Spencer Mogridge (right)

tailor the inputs required to maximise the performance of each ley. It's a more targeted, efficient and effective approach compared to the blanket use of inputs." "You have to approach growing grass as you would feeding the rumen. You need to feed it correctly to get the best performance," adds Chris. "Research shows that the minerals found in the soil come through in the final grass crop, which makes 'feeding' the soil even more important. We are setting up a trial at Spencer's farm to help test this theory and see if the soil analysis corresponds with the nutrient composition of the fresh grass samples we will take."

### Ley productivity

To help maintain the productivity of silage leys, fields are reseeded with Topgrass Silogen, which is a short-term 80% Advanced grass (*Festolium*) and

20% tetraploid-based seed mixture. This has been formulated for use in multi-cut systems.

Spencer and Ralph have always done their own silaging and fieldwork with help from their brother, George Mogridge, who is a contractor. So the brothers have the machinery needed to carry out the extra work that a multi-cut approach requires.

"We like to have the flexibility to go and cut grass when we choose," explains Spencer. "And we have always invested in maintaining silage making equipment to the best condition, with regular servicing and replacement."

Spencer acknowledges that machinery is a big cost for the business – and one that not all producers will want to carry – but he feels that it is a worthwhile investment. "We know that our kit is reliable and that we can go out and cut between 24 and 28 hectares a day with the machines we have. But we also have the luxury of knowing that in emergencies we can call on our brother, George. Investment in machinery has to be viewed as long term and if it means we can produce more and better quality silage, then it is worth it. It will reduce costs in the long run by helping to minimise our feed bills."

Spencer and his brother are pleased with how things went in 2017. "We took five cuts, starting with 48 hectares for first cut and then down to 28 hectares

for the fifth cut," he says. "We produced an average of 49 tonnes fresh weight of grass silage per hectare, across the whole growing season. We feed silage all year round, so it's vital that we have good stores in the clamp. And this increased quantity hasn't come at a cost in terms of quality. We are currently feeding fifth cut and it is producing a lot of milk – it's like rocket fuel."

### Prize-winning silage

Indeed silage quality is so good that Spencer and Ralph won second prize in the ForFarmers open silage competition for Dorset-based producers in December 2017. "The competition was a 'blind' assessment by independent judges who were looking at the quality and overall composition of silage samples," explains Chris. "Their silage won second place, which is great. But what is even more impressive is that the sample he provided was fifth cut and the winner's was a first-cut sample."

Even with this success, the brothers are still looking to further increase the amount of milk produced from forage. "We want to 'future proof' our business and protect ourselves from market volatility. Reducing our reliance on bought-in feed is one way to help us do this," says Spencer. "Ralph and I will look to take six cuts of grass silage this year and are aiming to get more than 50% of milk from forage in the future." |

Fertiliser applications: soil fertility is key to growing quality silage



Minimising waste: a block cutter is used on the silage face

