

Improving forage quality and increasing attention to detail are key to success

One small change offers significant benefits

Taking first, and any subsequent, silage cuts earlier in the season has improved silage quality and herd performance on one Dorset-based dairy unit. So what was the catalyst for making the change?

text **Emily Ball**

Just one small change has made a big difference to grass-silage quality and herd efficiency for tenant dairy producers, the Luther family. Improving quality by cutting earlier, as well as an increased focus on attention to detail, saw them named as southern area finalists in ForFarmers' Excellence in Farming Awards in 2017.

Colin Luther farms in partnership with his wife Barbara, and daughter Jackie and son Stuart, at Lychett Minster, near

Poole. The family milks 90 all-year-round calving Holstein cows and the herd averages more than 11,000 litres, at 3.95% fat and 3.25% protein.

Early cut

"We went along to a ForFarmers meeting about forage quality in December 2016 and were impressed by the young, dry silage samples on show from the Netherlands," says Colin. "It made us think about our first-cut cutting date



Jackie, Colin and Stuart Luther

and what effect bringing it forward could have on forage quality."

In 2017 the Luthers harvested first-cut grass silage on May 1 – two or three weeks earlier than in previous years. And they have seen a huge difference as a result. First-cut analysis revealed a high energy and high protein silage and these benefits were also seen in later cuts.

The milkers at High Farm are fed grass and maize silage, along a central feed passage



“Because we took first cut earlier, subsequent cuts moved forward and, in fact, where we usually take two or three cuts a year, in 2017 we took four cuts,” Colin explains. “The quantity harvested was less for each cut, but the quality was better throughout. Our second cut had previously gone into big bales, but in 2017 we clamped it and have fed it out this winter with great results. We make all our own silage and this gives us the flexibility to cut exactly when we want, not when a contractor is available,” he adds.

In November 2016 cows were averaging 10 litres of milk per day from home-grown forages and by November 2017 this figure had risen to 18 litres. “I put that increase, of 89% compared to the previous year, down to forage quality. It is enabling us to produce more milk from home-grown forage.”

Milk constituents

Improving cow yields from forage wasn't the only reason for adopting an earlier cutting date. Colin had also been speaking to ForFarmers' Dave Hunt about increasing milk protein levels.

“With constituents playing an increasing role in milk price, we felt that driving protein levels up was a priority,” says Mr Hunt. “High quality forages help to drive protein and the changes Colin has made have helped to push them up to an average of 3.25%. The Luthers have also looked carefully at the way they feed the cows and how that could be improved.”

The family makes full use of ForFarmers' support services, including full costing, Diet Plan, Visiolac, Insight and Dry NIR Forage Analysis. They use the fortnightly Grass Bulletin during the grazing season, as well as carrying out soil nutrient and fertiliser planning with help from ForFarmers' forage specialists.

The cows are fed a simple diet. Concentrate in the parlour and through out-of-parlour feeders, and grass and maize silage along the feed barrier. During the summer, cows are buffer fed before the evening milking.

Out-of-parlour feeders were introduced because the amount of concentrate fed to high-yielding cows in the parlour was causing digestive problems.

“We invested in out-of-parlour feeders and a collar system 10 years ago,” explains Colin. “And cows are now fed 3kg of concentrate in the parlour in two feeds and receive the rest, according to yield, in the out-of-parlour feeders.”



Out-of-parlour feeders were installed 10 years ago

“We found that we haven't seen as many digestive disorder problems and cows seem much more relaxed and yields have increased while feeding the same amount of concentrate. When cows are out to grass, between March and September, they still have access to the out-of-parlour feeders and we see them begin to drift back in an hour or so before milking to use them.”

Cow longevity

Attention to detail and more individual cow management has also helped to improve cow longevity. And not only has this helped to reduce the requirement and rearing costs of replacement heifers, but it also means that the business can sell between 10 and 15 surplus heifers each year.

“We've been a closed herd for 25 years,” says Colin. “We use sires to breed cows that suit our system. Cows need to be robust, because our dry cows remain outside during the winter. I select sires with good body capacity and plenty of milk. We also manage cows as individuals, as far as we can, and this helps them to achieve their potential.”

Milking is the ideal time to offer cows some individual treatment so when the family replaced the unit's abreast parlour, they knew exactly what they were looking for.

“I like the individual time and attention you can give with an abreast parlour,” explains Colin. “So, we settled on a four-a-side tandem parlour. This reduces milking time but also allows us to let cows exit individually, rather than in whole rows. And we can give cows and heifers individual attention when it's required.”

Dave Hunt says that all this attention to detail, coupled with the family's enthusiasm for dairying, is why he nominated them for the ForFarmers award.

“They are always keen to examine what they're doing and to look at how things could be improved. They monitor their progress and use the right information to make changes,” he says.

“They have developed a simple, but successful system. And this continues to improve because they pay attention to every detail in order to achieve excellent results.” |