

Award-winning columnist and Shropshire-based producer Roger Evans wonders if the 'perfect storm', created by a late spring and a dry summer, could see an increase in farm-gate milk prices.

It's all about the weather

If there's one thing we've learnt during the past 12 months it is that everything we aim to do only works if the weather cooperates. Our previous crop of broilers was due to leave the farm in early March, but the collection lorries were five days behind because they were delayed by snow.

And our broiler feed ran out because on-farm stocks are planned to coincide with the sheds being emptied. So we had to buy wheat from a neighbour to keep the birds fed (in a fashion).

Broiler production is carefully planned and the last thing you need is for the crop to go late and to feed the birds for five days on a 'make do' diet. It was a disaster.

Because spring was late, our cows went out a month later than planned. For spring-calving herds, it must have been a perfect storm. There could be a pun in there somewhere. They don't usually plan to have silage left in the spring and if my cows were late going out then so were theirs.

The grass grew in May and early June, as fast as I have ever known. So empty silage pits were filled quickly, but only to be emptied again when the drought came. Just how empty they will be as we go into the winter remains to be seen.

Dedicated spring-calving herds are an excellent example of a well-planned system of management that can go seriously awry if the weather is not somewhere near the norm.

I'm not having a go here – if all our grazing land were conveniently located close to the milking parlour then that's also how we would choose to farm.

I was talking, the other day, to a dairy producer who made an eloquent speech about empty silage pits, rising cereal prices (and higher prices for alternative feeds), high straw prices, a milk shortage, and on-farm prices of 45ppl by Christmas. I hope that there is a milk shortage.

Farmers and their unions have been banging on about food security for years. Consumers and politicians have largely ignored them, so perhaps a real shortage is the only thing that will make them listen.

As for seeing 45ppl, I doubt that very much. In round-figure terms, half of all milk produced goes to the liquid market and half goes to manufacturing. Processors always know where the best returns for milk are to be had.

If the liquid market were to become short then they would soon divert milk from, say, cheese into liquid. Quite what this would do to the price of cheese depends on how much milk and for how long.

And the farmer's speech? It had the feel of a rehearsal about it, as if he were trying it out on me before he tried it on his bank manager. I might use it myself.

