

Award-winning columnist and Shropshire-based producer Roger Evans ponders on past decisions and realises that a solution to a shortage of nearby grazing has been staring him in the face.

## 'Zero' grazing

**I**t's an important part of the very essence of farming that we have to make decisions on an almost daily basis. Sometimes they are big decisions, sometimes they are small decisions. Sometimes we get the decisions right, sometimes we get them wrong.

Often we get them wrong due to the vagaries of the weather or animals have contrived against us. Trying to make the right decisions is an important part of the challenge – and we enjoy the challenge. If we didn't then we would have probably chosen a different occupation.

We all think we are good at making these decisions. If we get a decision right then we may tell people. When we get it wrong it's best to keep it quiet about it. Everybody else knows anyway. They can usually see just by looking over your hedge.

Some farmers think they are so good at making decisions and they enjoy telling other farmers how to make theirs as well. Farmers like that usually carry a nickname.

It is usually 'knowledge' or 'ADAS'. In my lifetime I've known several farmers who have been called ADAS. The first time I heard it I said: "Why do you call him ADAS?" "Because he thinks he knows the bloody lot." This probably owes its origins to when ADAS was the government advisory service.

Like everyone else I think I am quite good at making decisions or 'management', as it's often called. But I'm not quite as good as I thought. For as long as I can remember my biggest farming problem has been having enough grazing for my cows. These days the land you have available to graze your cows on is called your grazing platform.

We rarely have enough grass to make into silage here at home and so, as the season progresses, we don't have extra acres to introduce that extend the size of the grazing platform.

Most of our land is two miles away and one solution is to have a proportion of the herd calving in the autumn so that they could be taken there in their mid-summer dry period. In dry summers this solution hasn't been enough, so we have had to buffer feed silage to supplement grass for the milking cows.

There has been another solution staring me in the face, but I've not thought of it until recently. There are, on the market, some very good zero grazing machines. If you are short of grass for the cows at home but you have plenty two miles away, why not fetch them a load?

These machines are simply a mower mounted on the front of a sort of forage wagon. Fresh grass has a much better feed value than silage. It's an extra cost at a time when we're seeking to reduce costs. But then buffer feeding silage is more expensive.

We all know that there's more milk in fresh grass than in silage and there are lots of ways to compare it. One tonne of fresh grass dry matter could be worth 100 litres of milk more than silage. Clean and efficient though these machines may be, they don't really do anything that my old Wilder flail harvester, with a trailer fixed behind it, wouldn't have done. But, sadly, that was lifted out of the nettles and onto a scrap dealer's lorry many years ago.

