

Reduce the acid load and protect rumen – and cow – health

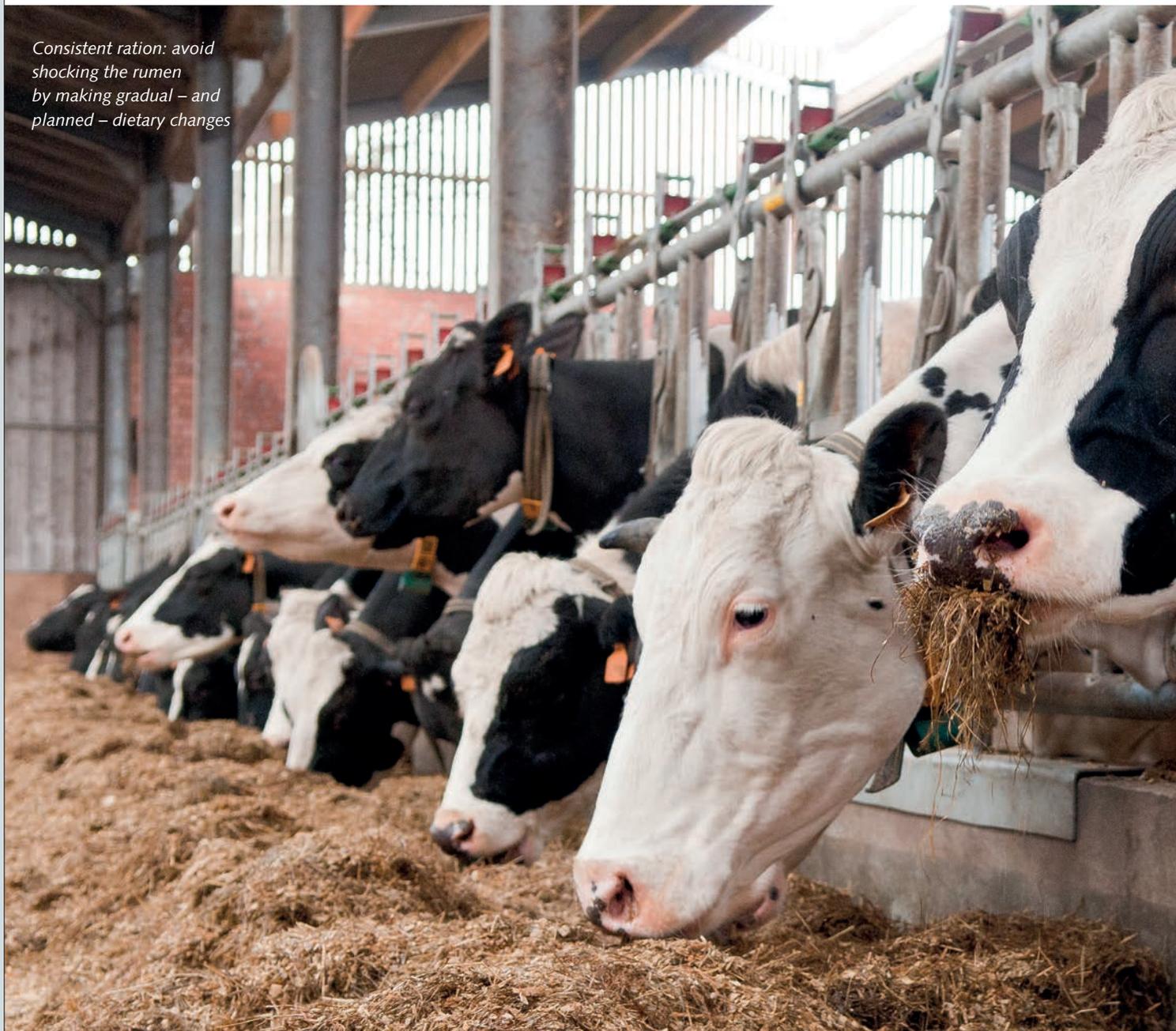
Plan carefully – and take good nutritional advice

Balancing winter rations could prove trickier than usual on some units this year. We offer some tips and pointers for producers who, with forage stocks already low, may find themselves in uncharted territory.

text **Rachael Porter**

The summer's drought will have repercussions for some UK herds throughout this winter – and not just due to the shortage of forage on some units. Many cows were grazed later than they would be in a more typical year, as producers made the most of a mild autumn and a late flush of grass growth. And that's great for helping to eke out

Consistent ration: avoid shocking the rumen by making gradual – and planned – dietary changes



forage supplies. But, on some units, late grazing has impacted on body condition scores and on the usual gradual switch to winter rations.

“I’ve seen cows taken, fairly abruptly, from grazing because producers have seen a sudden drop in milk yield and moved straight onto a high energy/ high starch winter ration,” says vet and Dugdale’s technical development manager Debby Brown. “This, in some instances, hasn’t given time for the rumen microbes to adjust. So not only is feed being wasted, due to poor feed conversion efficiency, but rumen pH has also suffered. This can result in SARA and, in extreme cases, acidosis.

“Producers should be taking careful steps to ensure that any bought-in or additional ingredients – be they forages,



Debby Brown: “Chopped straw is the obvious choice to add dry matter to rations”

co-products, blends or straights – complement the forage that’s in the clamp and a balanced ration is fed that will ensure a stable pH. They should also be taking care to introduce this ration in a controlled and gradual way.

“It’s vital to remember that cows – or rather the rumen – requires consistency when it comes to rations. This is even more important when you consider the heat stress and variable rations that herds have had to deal with during the past summer months.

“Early winter is the time to ensure that the cow and her rumen receive some ‘nutritional’ TLC to get her metabolism, rumen function and pH, and body condition score back on an even keel. More stress is the very last thing that cows need.”

Mrs Brown says that, for producers who don’t typically work with a nutritionist, this could be year to give it a go. “A specialist in cow diets will pay for themselves this year on most units. There are some good quality silages out there – both grass and maize, and some variable ones. But for many, quantities are an issue and alternative ingredients, that they’ve never fed before, are being used. Without proper advice and nutritional analysis and formulation, this could cause more issues than it solves. Issues that could be costly too.”

Protect investment

“And with the additional expense of buying in these feeds, producers need to protect that investment and make sure that they get value for money – not just more problems and any associated costs.”

So what should be the focus when balancing and supplementing available forages and what are the potential pitfalls that producers should be aware of?

“Work out how much dry matter from



Hefin Richards: “Forward plan to avoid knee-jerk reactions”

forage you’re actually feeding,” says Mrs Brown. “Many silage stocks are only allowing around 9kg of forage dry matter to be fed, but it needs to be between 11kg and 14kg. The next step is to decide how any additional dry matter is going to be added to the ration.”

Straw is the obvious choice. “This should be chopped to the same length as the grass silage in the ration – typically around 19mm for clamped silage – to help prevent sorting. If the silage is dry, then add water or molasses to the ration. This will also make it more palatable and help to reduce sorting.”

The practice of adding water to TMRs, or ‘compact’ feeding, is something that Mrs Brown is seeing more and more on farm. “And where silages are dry or are being mixed with other dry forages, such as straw, this comes into its own.”

Regular silage analysis is also vital, as it is in any year. “The key word here is regular – not just when you open the clamp. At least once a month, if not more often. It is the only way to really know what your starting point is when it comes to formulating rations.”

Assess stocks

Another key starting point, according to independent nutritionist Hefin Richards, from the Rumenation Nutrition Consultancy, is to carefully assess forage stocks so you can draw up a plan. “Just as in any other year, it’s about forage management and forward planning. The key is to avoid knee-jerk reactions and to do this you need to budget properly. Then you can take steps to avoid shortages. And review the situation as the winter progresses, so you can stay one step ahead.”

He says that by taking a close look at forage stocks – and analysing them – producers can then decide how best to utilise them. “If, for example, your first cut is a little wet and acidic but your

Equip cows to deal with the challenges and maximise productivity

Many producers are feeding different combinations of forages this winter and the challenge will be to keep productivity on target, according to Cargill's ruminant manager Philip Ingram.

"Wholecrop silage is a key forage on some units this year. It will replace grass silage and provide good 'structure' that will enhance rumen health," he says. "But the diet must be carefully balanced. The higher fibre, lower energy and protein content in wholecrop silage could have a detrimental effect on performance," he warns. "Other units, where the usual forages are in short supply and alternative forages are not available, may be feeding more concentrates

and co-products. But these may pose a risk of rumen acidosis."

In both cases, Dr Ingram says that producers should consider using a rumen buffer to control rumen pH.

He encourages a regular review of the checklist this winter. "Know what the forage is worth nutritionally and get regular analyses. And be aware of the impact of different forages on the diet and on animal performance.

"Ensure good feed management practices are followed to allow consistent and high intake. These include good mix quality, to prevent sorting. And makes sure that feed is delivered at the same time each day onto a fresh, clean passageway.

"Mark the silo and record use and



Philip Ingram

adjust throughout the season if this goes off target. Avoid having to make sudden drastic changes. And consider unfamiliar co-products. Work with your nutritionist to establish their real feed value," he adds.

second cut is dry, you can mix the two together to balance out what you have.

"It's always a good idea to sit down and discuss this with someone else, preferably a nutritionist, because there are typically always a few options and it's a case of working out what's best for your herd and your unit. Look at all the different scenarios for the forage portion of the ration and then weigh up the options for adding other feeds."

He says that there's an unusual market situation this year in that cereals are cheaper than fibrous feeds, like sugar beet pulp. "Wheat is around £175 per tonne, compared to £220 for sugar beet. So that's

something to be aware of when buying in concentrates, particular for herds that are already feeding wet and acidic silage. Producers should avoid feeding big slugs of readily fermentable starch through the parlour."

Maize pointers

Maize quality is variable but, overall, seems to be good this year. "On some units this year's maize was the best quality crop ever grown, even if yields were down slightly," says Mr Richards.

His key message on maize is to leave it in the clamp until January. Feeding it this side of Christmas is, in my opinion, a waste. The starch needs between eight and 10 weeks to break down in the clamp – longer if it's a particularly dry

crop. "And maize silage should be added to rations gradually. On many units it is introduced too quickly. Taking it slow gives the rumen bugs time to adjust and avoids waste and digestive upset.

"I prefer to see maize being added to rations from January and fed through to April. Throughout the winter producers should keep a close watch for indicators of poor rumen function.

"It's about taking things as close to the line as possible, without crossing it. If you feed 'blind', without analysing silage and balancing rations, you'll find yourself putting out fires. And any cases of acidosis will take five weeks or more to sort out. At the point, much of the damage has been done – not least to your bottom line." |

Maize silage: this year's crop is variable but, on the whole, quality is good

