

Weigh up **autumn-grazing balance**

A close-up photograph of a brown and white cow grazing in a lush green field. The cow's head is lowered towards the grass, and its body extends towards the right side of the frame. In the background, other cows are visible but out of focus. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

Autumn grazing is an opportunity for producers to continue to produce milk from the 'cheapest' feed available on farm – grass. But it's vital to look at the bigger picture and avoid incurring greater costs. We spoke to a vet and nutritionist to find out more.

TEXT RACHAEL PORTER

Much depends on the weather, and conditions under foot, as the season progresses. But many producers will be looking to extend their grazing season this year and make the most of the late flush of grass growth.

“Autumn grazing certainly has a part to play on many dairy units, but producers have to be realistic and pragmatic about how it fits into the bigger picture,” says Rumination Nutrition Consultancy’s Hefin Richards.

“Feed costs saved in the short term may not be worth it in the long run. Buffer feeding may be required to maintain milk yields and body condition. And grazing autumn grass is probably best suited to mid- and late-lactation, lower-yielding cows – those producing no more than 20 litres and dry and that are back in calf.

“Lush autumn grazing is certainly not for grazing by dry cows that are close to calving, and fresh and milking cows will require careful buffering if producers want to continue grazing them during the day.”

Autumn grass – although it can be plentiful and it’s a shame not to graze it – has its limitations. “It’s typically very high in protein and low in fibre. Many producers are unrealistic about this.

“It passes through the cow very quickly – and a lot of the protein goes with it – and milk ureas can be elevated. The cow can lose condition, yields can drop off and, in the case of early lactation cows, getting her back in calf will be more difficult.”

Body condition

“Autumn grass can be a recipe for disaster for close-up dry cows. Mineral imbalance and poor rumen fill can lead to difficulties at calving and in the transition period”, Mr Richards says.

“And far-off dry cows should also be managed carefully to temper energy intakes and prevent them from putting on excessive body condition. So there’s a lot to think about.”

So select which cows are suitable for autumn grazing and then carefully balance the ration. The high protein in the grass must be balanced with energy and something to slow its passage through the rumen.

“And complement this autumn grass with plenty of energy. Feeding wholecrop wheat in a buffer is ideal – it’s a decent amount of fibre, plenty of starch and it’s low in protein. Or look to add maize silage, sugar beet pulp, or nutritionally improved straw pellets as fibre sources.

“Soya hulls are also good for slowing the rate of passage through the rumen. Don’t forget that all-important rumen mat, which the rumen bugs need to work on.”

Mr Richards stresses that the potential feed cost savings from autumn grazing – typically between £1.50 and £3.00 per cow per day – can soon be lost and outweighed by the cost of problems caused by poorly balanced rations – lost yield, body condition and fertility issues.



Hefin Richards, nutritionist: “Autumn grazing isn’t an easy feeding option”

Producers also need to keep grass staggers in mind. “Lush autumn growth will be high in potassium, which antagonises magnesium uptake. A dead cow will wipe out any cost savings – and much more – in one fell swoop. So keep that in mind. Autumn grazing isn’t an easy feeding option. It’s important to look at the bigger picture.”

Dugdale’s technical development manager and dairy vet Debby Brown says that grass testing has a role to play in balancing autumn grazing and dairy rations. “Test the grass regularly and check the quality. It’s vital to avoid any nutritional ‘shocks’, and feeding a consistent ration is important,” she says.

Fertility issues

And she agrees that grazing fresh and high yielders in the autumn is a gamble. “Think hard about the repercussions of utilising ‘cheap’ grass. What will the fallout be for cows that are producing a lot of milk and are yet to get back in calf?

“Lost body condition will have to be regained when the cows are housed and this will also have a severe impact on fertility. There are some huge costs to cover here. So autumn grazing is not cost effective for all cows. It does depend on stage of lactation, fertility status and daily milk yield.”

Ideally, on most units, any close-up dry cows and fresh calvers should be inside and on full rations by mid-August. “But I can understand the temptation to graze them if grass growth is good.

“Producers have to weigh up the consequences of inadequate nutrition during such key stages of the cow’s lactation. And, if they can supplement them adequately to avoid any nutritional or metabolic stress, it could be an option.

“It’s vital not to just focus on the grass and assume that, if there’s plenty, it will meet the cow’s nutritional requirements for maintenance, fertility and milk yield.

“I think it’s safe to assume that early- and mid-lactation cows will require a buffer. If not to maintain dry matter intakes and rumen fill, then certainly to balance the high protein levels in autumn grass with a readily available source of energy and some additional fibre to slow down the grazed grass’ rate of passage through the rumen.” |



Debby Brown, vet: “Assume that early- and mid- lactation cows need a buffer”