



Take five and boost

The message is simple – make more milk from forage. But where do you start? And how can you break down this potentially daunting task into bite-size chunks, so you can manage changes and monitor progress?

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Increasing milk produced from forage, and boosting business profitability as a result, is achievable on most UK dairy units, according to Germinal's Helen Mathieu. And probably one of the best ways of doing this is to pick out key areas of silage making where there's potential for improvement and setting realistic targets.

The results of a survey of 200 producers, carried out by Germinal and Volac, showed an overwhelming desire by producers to improve production from forage and kick start the stagnation in this critical benchmark seen in herd costings.

In a joint initiative to help producers, the two companies launched their 'Five for 500' action plan, which focuses on five key areas that can each help to deliver an extra 500 litres from forage.

Forage target

"Forage is the cheapest source of feed and herds with higher performance in this area are always highest

Peter Smith:

"Taking a fresh approach will help many producers to make good progress"



ranked for profitability," says Ms Mathieu. "So it's not surprising that 98% of the producers we surveyed would like to improve their performance in this area.

"The frustrating part, as shown in our survey, is that less than half of producers actually know what their milk from forage figure is, and fewer still have set themselves a target, despite declaring their desire to improve." UK figures show that the top 25% of dairy herds are producing around 4,000 litres, or more, milk from forage. But the UK average milk from forage is half this – between just 2,000 and 2,500 litres from forage.

"So there's clearly great scope for improvement," adds Ms Mathieu.

"There's been little movement in overall milk from forage, certainly during the past 10 years, so we're recommending a fresh approach that we hope will help a good proportion of producers to make real progress," says Volac's Peter Smith.

Significant increase

"Grass silage is the mainstay of the forage ration for many, so we're recommending a focus on specific areas of its production where a significant increase in milk from forage is possible."

So, where to begin? "It was important to break down the process of increasing milk from forage into key stages so it's not overwhelming," explains Ms Mathieu. "And it allows producers to focus on one or two areas at a time. Each pointer could help to guarantee up to an additional 500 litres from forage."

Mr Smith also emphasises that each of these pointers must be simple to follow and execute. Before looking at the pointers for improving silage production, producers need a target for each stage. The survey showed that around two-thirds of producers are not setting themselves a milk-from-forage improvement target.

"But for the one-third that are, most are targeting an additional 500 litres," says Ms Mathieu. "This means that cows will need an extra eight megajoules per day from silage. So our recommended plan focuses on five areas within the grass silage making process where simple actions can make that extra energy available."



milk from forage

Point number one is to plan a forage budget. "Simple planning, based on the number of animals to be fed and target intakes and expected production per hectare, will ensure that the farm has enough silage of the right quality," she says. "Planning, with contingency built in, could easily mean an additional 1kg DM/head of quality silage intake."

The second point is to assess the raw material in the field, which means having a clear understanding of the potential performance of each of the fields ear-marked for silage making.

"Having this knowledge will allow the best decision making, and if that means a ley of higher quality ends up in the pit destined for the milking cow ration – as opposed to a poorer quality ley being ensiled – then that could raise the ME in silage by enough to make that significant difference," says Ms Mathieu.

Renovating or replacing leys routinely, to maintain productivity and quality, is the third action point on the list. There's no question that the higher quality silage, in terms of ME produced per hectare, comes from leys with a high proportion of sown species. This translates into increased milk from forage.

Mr Smith says that the fourth point of focus must be on reducing in-field losses – most notably by ensuring grass is cut for silage before it comes into head and by achieving efficient wilting. "Each day after grass has come into head it becomes less and less digestible, so its energy content for the cow declines."

Wilt quickly

"Similarly, the longer that grass is wilted, the greater the loss in its digestibility. The aim should be to wilt it as quickly as possible to 30% dry matter, but not much beyond that," he explains.

Last, but not least, is point five – to reduce ensiling losses. Using a quality additive has been proven to preserve silage quantity and quality. Analysis of 26 trials shows that the digestibility of an untreated silage could be increased by four D units, if it was treated. At a dry matter intake of 12kg per day, this is equivalent of an extra eight megajoules of energy.

'Five for 500 litres' from forage

1 Plan your grass silage budget

- How many cows/young stock to feed?
- What are target intakes?
- Are you producing enough?

2 Assess grass yield and quality in the field

- What percentage of sown species remain?
- Is soil nutrition/soil condition right?
- Are weed populations excessive?

3 Improve grass yield and quality in the field

- Which fields to improve?
- To renovate or fully reseed?
- Are you using top RGCL varieties in a balanced mixture?

4 Reduce in field losses

- Are you mowing grass at optimum stage?
- Are you mowing at the right time of day?
- Are you maximising conditions for wilting?

5 Reduce ensiling losses

- Do you fully avoid soil contamination?
- Is clamp compaction adequate?
- Are you applying a proven additive?

"We're also urging producers to calculate accurately just how much weight is needed for effective clamp consolidation," adds Mr Smith. "It's easy to underestimate this, but grass at 30% dry matter coming into the clamp – even at a normal 100 tonnes an hour – requires 25 tonnes of machinery rolling it."

Each of the points in the 'Five for 500 litres' action plan can contribute to the extra eight megajoules per cow per day.

"We recognise that not all the points will apply in many cases, but we are in firm agreement that there will be few units that would not see gains from attention to detail in at least one of the highlighted areas," adds Mr Smith. |