

# It's good to talk



Producers should be having a conversation with their contractor now to plan grass silage making – particularly if they’ve adopted a multi-cut system. We spoke to a producer, a contractor and a grassland specialist to find out why.

TEXT RACHAEL PORTER

**C**ontractors are key to making high-quality silage and producers will reap the benefit of good lines of communication – whether they use a more traditional silage making system, or use the multi-cut system and make silage every four or five weeks throughout the growing season.

“Speak to any contractor and most, if not all, would say that an early conversation about the coming silage-making season is invaluable,” says Lallemand Animal Nutrition’s Roy Eastlake. “A review of the previous season is always a good place to start, to talk about what went well, what was silage quality like, what will work better going forward. These are discussion points for the whole team, including the contractors.

“They’re the lynch pin – when they’re able to come and how they will cut, ted, cart and ensile the crop. All their techniques are key to ensuring that a top quality feed is made,” he says.

### First-cut plans

At a recent grassland discussion group, Mr Eastlake says he spoke to 40 producers and none had spoken to their contractor about first-cut plans. A contractor at the meeting, who has customers who have moved to multi-cut systems, said that not one of his clients had given him a call to talk about their plans for 2020.

“He added that this was a missed opportunity as early conversations, both in terms of reviewing the previous season and planning for the next, would set out their requirements and expectations, make sure they are understood and can be built into the overall plan for the season. This all helps to improve silage quality in the coming season.”

Mr Eastlake says that because timing is everything with multi-cut silage, priming your contractor well before they’ll be required on-site means that they can build in some ‘flexibility’ – they’ll be better able to accommodate your silage making requirements more readily.

“Good lines of communication with your contractor mean that they’re more likely to be able to come and make silage at the optimum time. They may be able to make an earlier date if grass is ready sooner than usual, if there’s been regular contact up until they get the call to say ‘all systems go’. You’re on their list – possibly at or near the top.

“If you call them out of the blue and possibly literally the day before you want them to come – which some contractors say does still happen – you’re not on their radar in the same way.”

So make sure that your contractor is a central part of

your dairy team. Keep them on board and ensure that they know what you’re trying to achieve. “That way you’ll get the loyalty and professionalism that you need to help make some top quality silage.”

Professional with a capital ‘p’ is Cumbria-based contractor Scott Whitaker. He says that it’s also up to the contractor to maintain good lines of communication with their clients. He cuts 1,250 hectares of grassland and all within a 10-mile radius of his business, and says that there’s no pecking order or favouritism, but he does know ‘what’s what’ on most of his clients’ farms.

“But there is sometimes a waiting list, if I get too many calls at once – I can only be in one place at any one time.”

He adds that his backlog is never more than a week but, for most producers, seven days can be the difference between a good silage and an average one. “I do have five ‘multi-cut’ clients and they’re the best at keeping me in the loop as to where they are in their silage making season.”

### Previous season

That said, Mr Whitaker says that he’s also got a pretty good idea of when individual producers are likely to call him. “I know their systems well and how they operate. What would be particularly useful is to have the heads up if they plan on making changes. And when the season is difficult, as it may prove to be this year after such a wet winter, it’s also useful to have a handle of what’s going on on farm.”

He says he’d welcome the chance to sit down, in later winter or very early spring, to review the previous season and outline a plan – however rough – for the



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next. Just such an early meeting would be a useful addition to his own efforts to meet his clients' needs. "I do relief milking for some of my clients and there are 'informal' conversations about, for example: silage quality, how it's feeding out, how the leys are performing, and likely first-cut dates. But a more formal discussion with the whole team could, in many instances, be useful."

He says he still gets calls the day before clients want to take a cut. "And it's usually OK, as I have them on my radar. But sometimes they do have to wait. I'd like to be the man that says 'yes' every time."

### Good relationship

Cumbria-based producer Michael Wilson runs a 245-cow herd near Millom. He's been using the same contractor to help make his silage for the past 10 years and adopted a multi-cut system three years ago. He knows how valuable it is to keep the contractor well-informed. "We have a good relationship and we speak regularly throughout the silage making season – not least because we're cutting every 30 to 35 days. He's kept in the loop." Michael does, though, admits that he may benefit from sitting down with his contractor, Tim West, in late winter/

early spring. "But, to be fair, Tim has a good idea of what we do each season now and what we're trying to achieve and I know we're firmly on his radar. Sometimes he rings me, just as I'm thinking of calling him, to see how things are going and when we'll be needing him. For producers who haven't been working with their contractor for so long or are switching to a multi-cut system, I can see the value having a pre-season planning meeting."

He knows – as does his contractor – that timing is everything. With that in mind, Michael and his brother Brian do all their own mowing and tedding, which he says helps with optimising cutting dates and controlling silage dry matter and quality. "But we still need Tim and his team to come and row up and pick up the grass and put it in the clamp. He's a vital part of the process and we make sure he knows that we value his professionalism. "We always look after his staff when they're working here – we lay on food and drink. And we also make sure we send them home with a token of our appreciation at the end of the season – usually some beer."

"In future, we'd like to organise a more formal 'thank you' perhaps a meal out at Christmas. The contractor and his staff are an important part of our team and we want them to feel appreciated." |

## Pre-cut testing benefits

More producers are recognising the value of pre-cut grass testing, in a bid to make silage at the optimal time. "I'd say about 50% of producers are now testing grass – predominantly to check nitrate levels – a few days prior to taking a cut of silage," says Trouw Nutrition GB's Liz Homer. "And some of those are testing regularly throughout the season, to monitor what's going on in their leys. These will typically be producers who have adopted a multi-cut system and are really on top of grass growth and quality. "It's 'safe' to cut grass once nitrate levels are

below 1,000mg/kg. So, for example, if grass testing reveals a level of 4,500mg/kg, producers need to wait at least seven days before cutting, if it's practical to do so. Grass will synthesise nitrates at a rate of 500mg per day, in ideal growing conditions. So within a week grass levels should be down to, or below, 1,000mg."

Dr Homer says that producers should speak to their feed adviser to discuss pre-cut testing and silage quality. "It's well worth doing where the benefits, in terms of improving silage quality, can be considerable."

