

Cash in on cereal

Making the right decision about when and how to harvest and preserve your cereal crop this summer will help to bolster winter rations and should also improve margins.

TEXT RACHAEL PORTER

The wet autumn in 2019, followed by a waterlogged and then extremely dry late spring, has caused serious issues for arable and dairy produces alike.

Those who have managed to establish an autumn or spring-sown cereal crop for use as home-grown forage are about to discover just how flexible they can be, according to Lallemand Animal Nutrition's Roy Eastlake. "And how particularly important it will be this year to make the most of any crops grown. "It is highly likely that producers will be faced with the combination of squeezed milk prices and increased purchased feed costs this winter. This means the focus will have to be on maximising production from forage while controlling feed costs where possible," he says. "At the same time, with reduced cereal planting, this year straw prices could increase."

Rumination Nutrition Consultancy's Hefin Richards says that producers are indeed facing a 'testing' season – on many levels. "Producers need to assess what they have in their clamps and what they're able to produce and be prepared to be flexible and 'juggle' to ensure that dairy rations remain consistent."

He says that producers who were unable to sow winter cereals, due to the wet autumn, and also struggled to find a suitable spring window, again due to the appalling weather, may have even opted to grow more maize this year: "I have seen this, even after the issues that many producers had trying to harvest their maize crop in 2019. Thinking was that some producers would shy away from growing maize, but faced with bare land, some are actually increasingly their acreage."

Some producers with lighter land did get in with the



drill and sow a cereal crop. "But now they're faced with a lack of moisture for good growth. It will be a tricky year and producers should take great care to make the most of what they can grow successfully."

Several options

The good news is that a cereal crop – once it's up and growing – offers many options; an important one being that producers can delay harvesting to suit their changing requirements.

"The first option, earliest in the growing season, is to cut as wholecrop – at between 40% and 45% dry matter – which on most units will be towards the middle of July," adds Mr Richards. "So this still allows plenty of time to assess forage stocks and analyse grass silages to aid good decision making." Cereals – barley or wheat – taken as wholecrop will increase forage stocks and allow higher intakes. Otherwise the crops could be crimped to provide a quality, rumen-friendly energy source to replace purchased feeds while also producing straw."

Mr Eastlake explains that key to making the best decision is to review first-cut silage production, revise the winter forage budget and have a clear understanding of forage stocks. "Only then can

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crop flexibility



producers decide if cereals will contribute most effectively as a source of forage or as a purchased feed replacer. Calculate the weight of first-cut silage and analyse it to work out the tonnes of dry matter produced, so far, and the tonnes still needed to hit or exceed the planned daily forage dry matter intake during the coming winter.

“If there’s a chance that you will be short of forage, then wholecrop will be the sensible choice. Conversely, if forage stocks look plentiful then making crimped grain could be the best economic decision. Producers could also choose to split the hectare, taking some as crimp and some as wholecrop depending on forage stocks. This flexibility is a real plus point.”

Mr Eastlake adds that fermented wholecrop can be made with any of the principle cereal crops and will usually yield between 20 and 30 tonnes freshweight per hectare, depending on the crop grown. “It is typically harvested at between 35% and 45% dry matter, as this maximises the yield and nutrient content.

So, to summarise, wholecrop is a high energy forage that is rich in slowly fermenting starch. When combined with effective physical fibre from the



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“Weigh up the options and carefully calculate your next move with this year’s cereal crop”

straw, this makes it an ideal rumen friendly forage. It also complements young, high energy, high digestible fibre grass silage. “Crimp should be considered as a high energy, moist concentrate replacing combined cereals in the diet. As the starch in crimp is more slowly fermented, it can be used to increase cereal inclusion rates without increasing the acidosis risk, says Mr Eastlake.”

A crop destined for crimping will usually be harvested at between 60% and 75% dry matter, around three weeks ahead of typical harvest and yield between 6.7 and 8.3t DM/ha. It is then passed through a crimping machine, which fractures the seed coat to expose the starch prior to treatment with an inoculant and ensiling.

He says that both wholecrop and crimp need to be ensiled with a specialist heterofermentative inoculant to improve aerobic stability, inhibit the growth of yeasts and moulds, and reduce heating. Lallemand Magniva Platinum Wholecrop and Platinum Crimp contain a unique combination of bacteria which deliver the exceptional stability required with drier, high starch feeds.

Straw prices

The wholecrop option would allow 5kg DM/day for a 150-cow herd for a 200-day winter, boosting forage intakes or allowing less concentrate. The crimped crop would allow 3.75kg DM/cow/day, displacing up to 4.75kg of fresh weight cereals or equivalent. “Growing 15 hectares of cereals could produce around 150t DM of wholecrop. Alternatively they could produce around 113tDM of crimp, plus 55 tonnes of straw,” he adds. Straw prices are a consideration here. “If it’s looking likely that it might be in short supply this year, which is how things are certainly looking at the moment, then combining could be a shrewd move,” adds Mr Richards.

He stresses that decisions will have to be made on a unit by unit basis: “But it’s important that producers weigh up their options and calculate their next move when it comes to cereal crops this year. Once cut, you can’t go back. So make sure you assign the crop to the place you most need it and cut accordingly so you can provide the herd with a balanced ration – and possibly some extra bedding – this coming winter.” |