

Hedgerows: a study of their added value for dairy farms

Hedgerows and vegetation windbreaks have ecological value and improve the landscape, but can they also be functional and financially viable elements on dairy farms? That is the key question behind agro-innovation centre De Marke's Hedgerow 2.0 project.

Researchers at Wageningen Plant Research and the Louis Bolk Institute are designing and analysing various types of hedgerow for the project, varying things like the vegetation mix, height and position. Such hedgerows are a traditional feature of the patchwork farmland and dry sandy soils of the Achterhoek region in the eastern Netherlands. 'The idea is to showcase them at De Marke to demonstrate the potential of hedgerows to

farmers,' says project leader Rob Geerts of Wageningen Plant Research's Agrosystems Research group. The researchers also intend to plant functional hedgerows at two dairy farms in the Achterhoek.

Business model

Demonstrating the value of hedgerows may therefore be the most important aspect of the project, thinks Geerts. 'Gelderland – in fact the whole of the Netherlands – is faced with a huge challenge: to save biodiversity and plant more woodlands,' he says. 'To win the support of land users, and in Gelderland that basically means farmers, you need to offer them a good business model.' This is important, because planting hedgerows

reduces a dairy farmer's crop production area and manure quota, as the land used for them is subtracted from these calculations.

So the challenge is to use hedgerows in ways that positively contribute to dairy farm operations. Geerts: 'Like forage trees, for example: vegetation that is rich in minerals, trace elements and other healthy nutrients that the cows can graze on at their leisure – rather like a natural medicine cabinet.' Other functions the project is exploring include carbon sequestration and the absorption of nitrogen and particulate matter. The project is funded by the provincial Nature-Inclusive Agriculture for Gelderland Action Plan and will run at least until mid-2024. ME