

# Monitor and balance rations

**Making the best use of grass silage over the second half of the winter will be crucial in order to benefit from rising milk prices and to offset higher purchased feed costs.**

The year 2021 will go down as one of the most difficult grass silage seasons on record.

On most dairy farms, cows are going to be housed for at least three more months on winter rations. So it is vital that diets are as effective as possible, to make the most of forages and benefit from recent increases in milk prices.

"While milk price rises will be very welcome, they will not cover all the input price increases," comments Dr Liz Homer, ruminant technical development manager with Trow Nutrition GB. "This means that the focus must remain on managing cows efficiently to make the best use of the higher milk price.

"As we enter the second half of the winter, it is worth considering the key objectives though to

turnout. The first should be to keep cows milking as well as possible with high milk quality as you want them milking well when they go on to spring grass.

"The second is to make sure cows are in calf and that calving intervals are not dragging out as this will have implications for the next milk year. Finally, cows need to be kept healthy and, in particular, sound of their feet ready to graze.

"Achieve these and cows should be capable of driving good margins at grass, provided that milk prices continue to rise or at least remain at the current levels."

## Variable grass silages

For many farmers the challenge has been getting cows to milk on the variable grass silages that



Dai Lewis from Massey Feeds.

filled clamps last year. Dai Lewis, technical commercial manager with Massey Feeds, comments that variation is the barrier to consistent performance. He highlights marked changes in lignin content which have affected how cows use the feed, explaining that, while NDF content can remain unchanged, variations in lignin affect how it will feed.

"We are also seeing big variations in feed value as we move through and across clamps, especially those with a big face. This can lead to variable intakes and changes in the diet which can be minimised if clamps are analysed more often so we know more accurately what we are working with.

"This can potentially allow purchased feeds to be trimmed back, which can help reduce feed costs. Alternatively, it can allow supplements to be changed to better balance the rumen and keep cows performing. Either way, it should be possible to get cows performing as well as possible.

"Between now and turnout, the emphasis has to be on

balancing diets but not cutting corners. You want cows ready to perform well at grass. This means you must not let them suffer the consequences of variable forages or higher feed costs now."

Dr Homer urges getting clamps analysed more regularly. She emphasises that the time taken to collect a representative sample will be time well spent as it will allow diets to be fine-tuned for more efficient production.

"At any point in the clamp, you will see variations in dry matter, protein, energy, NDF, lignin and fermentation quality—all of which impact on the nutrients supplied to the animal on both a freshweight and dry matter basis and can impact dry matter intakes.

"Only by having a representative sample taken regularly—certainly no less frequently than monthly—and analysed by a reputable FAA proficiency approved laboratory, will you get an understanding of the forage currently being fed and allow diets to be balanced accordingly."

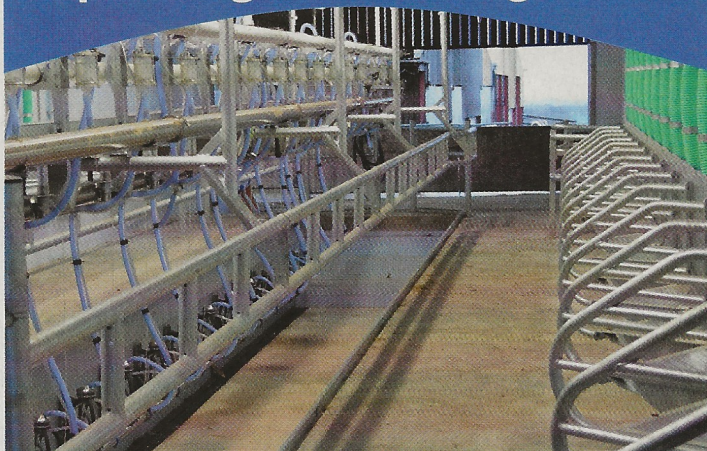
## Dry matter variation

Dr Homer comments that change in the headline figures can have a significant impact on the production from forage. The table below shows the effect of variations in dry matter on energy supply. Unless the dry matter is known, she says it is easy for cows to be over or underfed.

"The same is true for changes in ME content. Assuming 10kg DM of silage is being fed, a change

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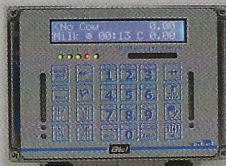
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### Effect of changes in silage dry matter within a clamp on intakes and production from forage

Silage FW (kg)	33	33	33
Dry matter (%)	25	30	35
Dry matter fed (kg)	8.25	10	11.5
ME intake @10.5MJ/kg DM	87	105	121
Difference compared with 30% DM (MJ)	-18		+16
M+ (litres/day)	1	5	8



## THE CREAM AWARDS

DAIRY INDUSTRY TRADE AWARDS 2021

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## Looking back at 2021 with Singletons Dairy

**F**or us, as for many others, the past year was extraordinarily challenging. I wonder how many times last year everyone's customers heard the word 'unprecedented' suffixed with bad news. For a family-owned cheesemaker that prides itself on using traditional, hands-on manufacturing methods, the acute labour shortage stands out amongst the many tribulations. As does the chaos of national and international freight. US cheesemakers were supposed to be worrying about slow vats and bitter peptides not the ease with which traffic was passing through the Suez Canal.

But, out of the 'unprecedented' challenges emanating from Wuhan and Westminster, we are seeing some encouraging trends: for a start, consumers are more focused on provenance and quality. And the visible frailty of long supply chains can only benefit locally-sourced foods.

Our foray into supermarkets did not begin until the tenure of the current owner, Tilly Carefoot. Her father firmly believed that supermarkets were a flash in the pan. Maybe he will be proved right after all!

Whatever COP26 did or did not achieve, it seems inevitable that British consumers are going to cut down their dairy consumption. Surely this will mean those consumers will be more selective about the elements of dairy that they retain in their diet. Again, the champions of provenance and quality feel best-placed to capitalise on this. In our meetings with retail buyers, the buzzwords 'story' and 'authenticity' are cropping up more and more.

In 2021, we shipped an order of more than 20 tonnes of Beacon Fell Traditional Lancashire Cheese PDO to one international retailer, likely the largest export of 'Beacon Fell' ever. And our retail sales around the world have been generally strong. With the curtailment of eating out, people have been investing more in eating in, well.

Last year we focussed on growing our collaborations with smaller artisanal cheesemakers, working to get their cheese into the UK multiples. This project is starting to bear fruit: for example, Waitrose's listing of 'Rebel Nun' from the award-winning team at Feltham's Farm. What a cheese!

For us, Christmas was long. The cheese destined for the Canadian holiday season starts to depart at the beginning of August; they have an October Thanksgiving, and UK retailers were taking Christmas lines all the way up to the wire. January is a welcome time for reorganisation and reflection.

**"For a family-owned cheesemaker that prides itself on using traditional, hands-on manufacturing methods, the acute labour shortage stands out amongst the many tribulations"**

*Singletons Dairy*

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*"We are also seeing big variations in feed value as we move through and across clamps, especially those with a big face," says Liz Homer*

of 0.5MJ/kg DM will affect the energy from silage by 5MJ/day—which is enough to produce a litre of milk—so it is vital that producers know the actual energy content of the silage."

She also explains that changes in analysis will also affect how the forage is utilised in the rumen, affecting rumen balance and how efficiently the diet as a whole will perform.

"Dry matter influences how quickly feeds ferment in the rumen. If DM is lower with wetter silages, then the feed will ferment more quickly and could be higher in fermentable carbohydrates and proteins which can have consequences for rumen acidosis.

"NDF levels and slowly fermentable carbohydrates will also affect how quickly the diet ferments. We have seen issues with high NDF silages impacting on rumen throughput and total dry matter intakes. The digestibility of the NDF is also important, which is influenced by lignin levels

"Crude protein in the silage can vary greatly between fields and cuts and this will affect the supply of fermentable protein and further upset rumen balance.

Cows and the rumen bugs crave consistency, so ensuring rumen balance is important to support the rumen bugs for optimum fibre digestion and efficiency.

"It may be necessary to change the sources of energy and protein to more closely balance silages. So be prepared to challenge the make-up of blends."

### *Diet presentation*

Alongside regular analysis and re-rationing, Dr Homer advises focusing on helping cows make the most of the diet. She stresses the importance of pushing feed up regularly and ensuring sufficient space per cow and adequate time to eat. She recommends sieving diets to check the diet feeder is delivering a consistently presented diet, or sending a sample to the Trow Nutrition laboratory for a full TMR check.

"By paying attention to detail it will be possible to make the most of silage—keeping cows milking as effectively as possible so they are in good shape to hit the ground running at turnout and allowing good margins at grazing," she adds.