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HEALTH & NUTRITION



David Wilde believes that the variable grass silages made this year will make this a challenging winter

Poor silage may make it a tough winter

IT ALWAYS looked likely that it was going to be a challenging winter given the variable grass silages made.

Now, as cows settle onto winter diets, the extent of the problem is becoming clearer, says David Wilde of Massey Feeds.

“Some silages are excellent and feeding very well, some not so,” he says.

“We are hearing of cows milking poorer than expected, often two to three litres off the pace. So why is this and what can we do about it?”

“The most likely cause is the fermentation achieved this year.”

Taking a closer look at the fermentation of silages this year, a number of problems have been seen adds David.

In many crops, protein levels have been high. You might think that’s a good thing, but high protein buffers the fermentation, slowing it down – and that’s the last thing you want.

This prolonged fermentation can produce more water, making silages wetter and more prone to slipping.

Wetter silage also requires a greater amount of lactic acid to preserve it effectively.

If this doesn’t happen, then the silage is likely to have higher levels of acetic and butyric acids and ammonia, resulting in poorer intake and feed utilisation.

Poorly-fermented silage may have a sort of antiseptic smell. This could be due to the production of ethanol and other alcohols – such as propanol – during the fermentation process. Propanol can give silage a vinegary smell and this may reduce palatability.

David says: “Alcohols might be a big problem as they are antimicrobial.

“All silages contain some ethanol and rumen bacteria are able to metabolise this. However, at higher levels the silage fermentation may be less than desired and rumen function may be impaired as the alcohols can inhibit the rumen microbes.

“Typical levels of alcohols in grass silage are around 8-10g/kgDM.

“However, new analysis of our data would suggest levels could reach up to 70g/kg DM which would be a big problem.”

David says Massey Feeds is also seeing silages with high levels of lactic and VFAs, the effect of which is to reduce the energy available for rumen microbes, leading to slower rumen throughput and reduced intakes.

It will also result in reduced microbial protein production... and all of these will have consequences for milk production.

It is going to be a winter when you need to react quickly to what is unfolding in front of you to keep cows milking as well as they can

“The big question is what to do about it?”

“The first thing is to test all silages regularly, at least monthly if not more frequently. It is vital to have an up to date picture of what is going into the diet,” says David.

“A sample sent for NIRS analysis will be back on farm within 24-48 hours and give the information needed to finetune the ration.

“Then the key is to keep the rumen microbes as happy as possible, allowing them to do their job.

“Make sure the diet is providing the right balance of rumen fermentable energy, fibre and carbohydrates to optimise rumen efficiency. If acidosis could be a problem, consider adding a live yeast and/or rumen buffer.

“It is going to be a winter when you need to react quickly to what is unfolding in front of you to keep cows milking as well as they can,” David concludes.