HOW TO **OPTIMISE SILAGE** THIS SEASON

Experts from Forage Analysis Assurance Group share their top tips on maximising silage quality.

Asked about current grass quality, Nacia Bonnick, Trouw Nutrition digital solutions and sustainability lead, ruminants, said: "NDF levels in fresh grass are looking slightly lower than last year respectively, indicating a less-lignified crop."

Assuming that the mild weather continues, it looks like this year's silage will be a more digestible crop than last year, also benefiting from the ability for fertiliser applications due to favourable ground conditions. "Looking at the grass growth wedge, we are looking to have a similar quantity of grass for the time of year, however, the last few weeks have seen a true spring flush!"

When it comes to managing the milder winters and unpredictable weather, monitoring of both weather and analysis is key, Nacia advised. "NDF, free nitrates and sugars are good nutrients to assess the optimal date for cutting but we must balance quantity, quality and fermentation stability along with practical implications like contractor availability and ground conditions, e.g. last year, according to NDF levels optimal cutting period was mid-April through to May – however practically many farmers struggled to harvest due to field conditions."

To maximise silage quality, David Wilde, Massey Feeds national ruminant technical manager, advised aiming for around 28–30% dry matter in the crop arriving in the pit. Do not wilt for more than 24 hours as the grass will lose too much nutrition, he added.

"Ted it out straight away as most water will be lost in the first two hours. Ensure the chop length is set to match the dry matter of the crop arriving in the pit – longer when wet, shorter when dry. Sealing the clamp properly is of utmost importance – side sheets as well as cling film as the first top barrier (under the regular plastic and tyres) will pay dividends. You know if it is sealed well as the clamp should 'rise' like a small balloon as the gases try to escape. Remember, silage fermentation is an anaerobic process – no oxygen wanted."

Nacia recommends monitoring sugars and if <15% DM, consider the use of an additive to ensure good fermentation and a stable silage. "Sugars are needed as energy for LAB for the rapid pH drop needed to ensile effectively. Not achieving this can be costly in terms of nutritive value and financials. We are at risk this year with the hot spell that we are going to experience high free nitrates if we suddenly get some rain before first cut."

Concluding, David stresses the importance of silage analysis. "Without an accurate analysis of the silage, we cannot know what is the best feeding solution to achieve the farm goals. Regular/monthly testing will keep on top of things and allow changes to be made in the ration, if necessary." FG