

Top tips to make best use of grass this year

Making the best use of grass grown between now and the end of the season could have a big impact on margins, particularly this year. British Dairying reports.

Grass, whether grazed or conserved, is still the cheapest feed for cows. That is even after factoring in the increased growing costs, particularly fertiliser and diesel this year.

“Good quality grazing or grass silage provides an excellent base for rations and can allow more cost-effective supplementation, to help mitigate higher feed prices,” says Georgina Chapman from molasses blends specialist ED&F Man.

Forage dilemma

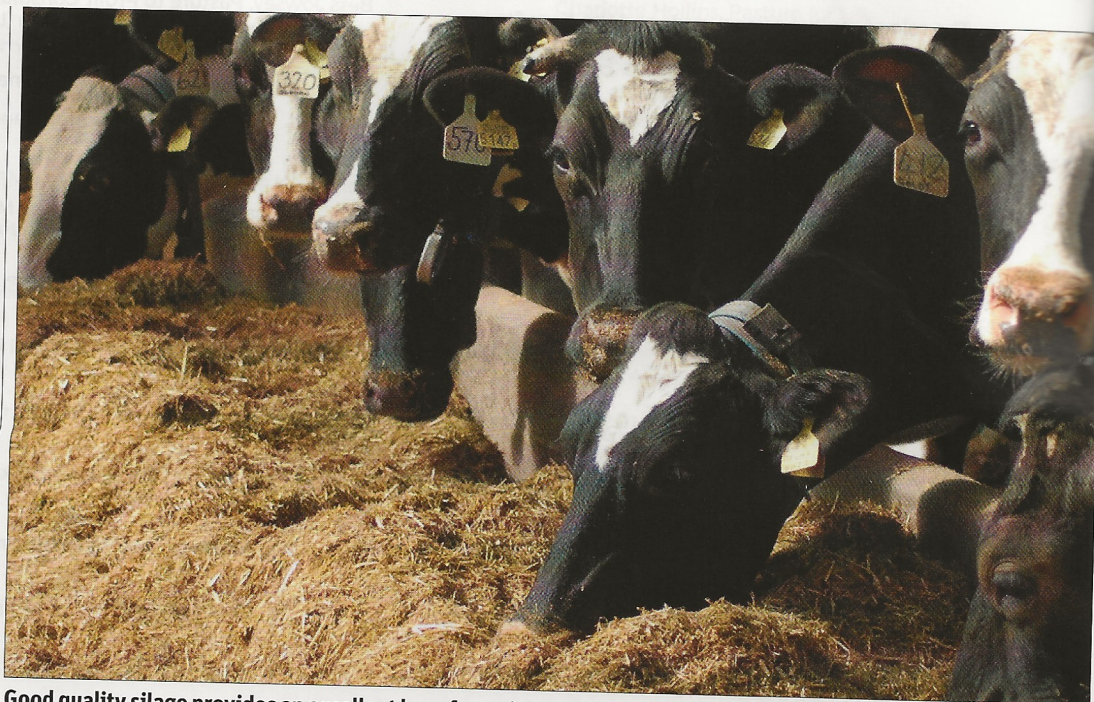
“Many farms are facing a dilemma this season, deciding on the best strategy to make use of grass. Producers need to weigh up the benefits of allowing more ground for grazing against making more silage for winter stocks. Or perhaps it will be a compromise of the two, keeping some cows out on an extended grazing system. Either way, a well thought-out decision could have big benefits.”

Georgina believes the rain in the second half of May, coming just after first cut in many parts of the country, will promote better grass growth. But it is also essential to optimise quality output, she stresses.

“Poor quality grass will reduce both intakes and productivity, so it will be vital to have high quality grazing management. Also, ensure silage is cut at the optimum stage and ensiled quickly.”



Molasses can improve efficiencies



Good quality silage provides an excellent base for rations, with supplements helping to mitigate high feed prices

The starting point when deciding how to best use grass is to assess likely silage stocks heading into winter, she explains. First cut quantities can be accurately assessed and an early analysis will indicate feed values. Growth on fields destined for second cut should allow for a good estimate of yields. Maize and wholecrop yields can also be reliably predicted.

“Carrying out an update on forage stocks will indicate if more grass needs to be earmarked for later cuts, or whether the option to release more for grazing is viable. Whichever strategy is adopted, it is important that forage is effectively supplemented to ensure cows make the most of the feed value in grazing or silage.”

“Molasses blends can play an important role whatever the decision, and once a storage tank is on farm it is easy to switch between blends to react as the season unfolds.”

For producers looking to make more of grazing, research carried out at the Agri-EPI South West Dairy Development Centre shows that buffer feeding straw and molasses can

conserve winter forage stocks, while helping to balance grazing effectively.

The trial evaluated the impact of replacing a proportion of grass silage in a buffer feed with a mix of wheat straw and Regumix, a palatable high-energy 18% protein molasses-based liquid feed.

Dry matter intakes

In both diets the grazing intakes were the same and the total dry matter intake was unchanged. Performance was then compared between cows on the original buffer feed and the molasses: straw version.

“Over a six-week period there was no difference in yield between cows fed the initial buffer and those where straw and Regumix was included,” says Georgina. The cows on the molasses and straw feed showed similar lactation persistency and slightly better compositional quality. Importantly, there was no difference in body condition between the two groups, ensuring both diets were meeting the cows’ maintenance and production requirements.

“The resulting effect was a saving of 7.5kg/cow of grass silage per day,” she explains. Across 200 cows the total silage saved over six weeks would have been more than 60t, allowing more for winter feeding.

Grazed grass tends to be high in readily available protein for much of the grazing season. To fully utilise this and reduce nitrogen pollution, the rumen needs a balance of rapidly fermented carbohydrates. The sugars in cane molasses are an ideal source and will also stimulate fibre digestion, helping to maintain butterfats - which could have economic benefits.

“For producers considering keeping cows grazing longer, a buffer feed containing straw and a molasses blend will help maintain rumen function, improve use of grazing and help preserve silage stocks for later in the winter.”

Where producers decide to focus on maximising silage production, quality is key; it is often a false economy to strive for bulk, says Georgina. “Last winter it was common to hear of producers struggling to achieve high

forage intakes and of cows not milking on the silage. Many herds yielded around two litres/cow per day below expectation.

High fibre silage

“In most cases this was due to higher fibre silages, which reduced intakes and slowed rumen throughput,” she explains.

“Data from Trow Grasswatch for this season indicates a high fibre index and low levels of rapidly fermentable carbohydrates around the time of first cut. This might transfer into high fibre and low sugar levels in first cuts.”

Poorer quality silages will require greater supplementation to improve performance. “Producers looking to maximise silage production need to make the best quality forage they can. Then they should analyse it regularly and supplement it carefully. Again, molasses can play a role in this.”

Molasses contains sugars and numerous organic acids. The sugar fraction is a blend of different sugars including sucrose and glucose, which are the important six-carbon sugars. “Six-carbon sugars are proven to be more beneficial to dairy cows than the five-carbon sugars found

in fermentation co-products, wheat syrup, processed feeds and silages,” says Georgina.

“They are more highly rumen fermentable, increasing microbial protein production and stimulating rumen fungi to improve fibre digestion.”

Cane molasses blends also have a significant impact on the rate of rumen fermentation. Sugars are rapidly fermented, and most will be fermented within two to three hours of feeding. But trials show that the rumen fermentation remains more active long after the sugars are gone. “By promoting faster and more

active fermentation, this will increase rumen throughput and so stimulate dry matter intakes,” she explains. “By raising the sugar levels in the diet to 6-8%, while holding overall starch plus sugar at around 28-32%, we can create a more efficient fermentation without increasing the acidosis risk.”

Reduced protein costs

Molasses blends could also be a way to reduce protein costs this winter as blends can be produced containing rumen regulated proteins. For example, Regulated Release is a urea-based source of protein which behaves more like soya than urea.

The slower release of nitrogen in the rumen ensures optimum utilisation and minimal nitrogen wastage.

Research with the University of Reading showed that adding 1.4kg of Regumix improved nitrogen retention, with resulting lower urinary nitrogen and milk nitrogen levels.

“On many farms, the decisions made in the next few weeks regarding the use of grass will have a big impact on performance and profitability,” says Georgina.

“Whatever decision is made, the use of molasses blends can help improve forage utilisation and drive higher margins.”

Treatment	Control	Mol 0.7	Mol 1.4	Mol 2.1
Milk urea	277	271	269	277
N digestibility (g)	0.669	0.669	0.682	0.677
N urine (g)	158	150	146	159
N milk (g)	190	184	174	179
N retained (%)	7.9	9.0	12.0	13.1

Treatments are 0.7, 1.4 and 2.1kg of Regumix replacing other diets. Diets were isoenergetic and isonitrogenous



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