

Fodder & Forage Crops

Straw could be used to help stretch silage stocks this autumn and winter as farmers deal with reduced forage availability. **Dairy Farmer** reports.

Care needed to balance straw-based rations

In many part of the country, 2025 has been a challenging forage-growing season.

While in some regions of the country there are ample forage stocks, elsewhere shortages are a real concern.

In cases where forage is limited, dairy farmers are being advised to make plans now to minimise the impact of changes on production over the winter.

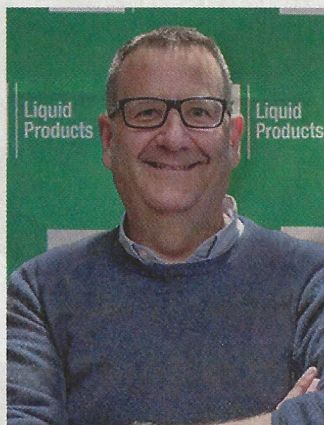
Dr Phil Holder, from molasses liquid blends specialists ED&F Man, emphasises that making small changes sooner will be more beneficial than major changes later in the season.

He says: "Cows perform at

their best on a consistent diet and it can take the rumen up to two weeks to adapt to a significant change in ration composition, so it is best to avoid major sudden changes.

"Adopting a strategy of hoping forage stocks will be adequate and then having to implement major changes will be less effective than facing up to the situation as soon as possible, so that the diet can remain as unchanged as possible throughout the winter."

With grass silage cuts largely taken and maize crops harvested, he advises that it is imperative to carry out a stock check of forages in the clamp.



Dr Phil Holder

He stresses the sooner this is done, and there is a realistic picture of how stocks relate to expected requirements, the easi-

er it will be to plan how to manage the situation.

He says: "Once you know the forage available, you can compare this to what you need to identify any shortfall.

"Then you will be in a position to plan how to tailor rations to meet this shortfall most effectively. It might be that you feed less forage to all cows throughout the winter.

Prioritise

"Alternatively you might decide to prioritise silage, particularly the better-quality material, to fresh calved cows, cutting silage to later lactation animals.

"Finally it might be an option



Adding straw to the ration could be one ways of countering a shortage of forage stocks this winter.

FORAGE RESEARCH

TRIALS at the Southwest Dairy Development Centre in conjunction with Kingshay showed that it is possible to successfully replace 2.5kg silage dry matter in dairy diets (around 7-10kg freshweight) with 2.2kg freshweight of straw and 1kg of an 18% crude protein molasses blend (Regumix).

Assuming cows had been fed 12.5kg dry matter (DM) of silage, moving to 10kg DM of silage and the straw/molasses blend

alternative would mean every four days on the new diet would save enough silage to allow an extra day of winter housing from current silage stocks.

Ration

Dr Holder says the ideal way to feed straw is as part of a total mix ration but it can be fed free access and top dressed with a molasses protein blend.

When implementing a straw-based diet, Dr Holder says it is

important to provide good access to a plentiful supply of clean water. He also says the transition from a silage-based diet to a straw-based one must be controlled, by introducing more straw into the diet and reducing silage over a few days to give the rumen microbes time to adjust to the new forage.

Finally, straw is deficient in minerals so additional mineral supplementation could be necessary.



Once you know the forage available, you can compare this to what you need to identify any shortfall

DR PHIL HOLDER

to exclude silage altogether from dry cow and youngstock rations.

"But the sooner you start planning, the more effective the changes will be."

One option to help stretch silage stocks will be straw, with every kilogramme of straw able to replace 4-5kg of silage depending on silage dry matter, although Dr

Holder stresses that straw alone will not fully replace silage.

He says: "While straw will produce fibre and bulk, it is low in many key nutrients.

"It is lower in metabolisable energy than silages and, in addition, straw-based rations need to be carefully balanced in terms of protein, specifically rumen

degradable protein. The key to replacing silage with straw is maximising intakes and digestibility and promoting high levels of rumen microbial activity.

Dr Holder says molasses-based liquid feeds can help overcome the shortfalls when feeding straw.

He explains that 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.

These are proven to be more beneficial to dairy cows being more highly rumen fermentable, increasing microbial protein production and stimulating rumen fungi to improve fibre digestion.



LOWER DUST LEVELS



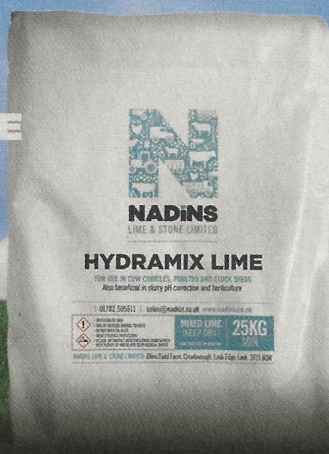
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