

Livestock Beef

While in some regions there are ample forage stocks, elsewhere in the UK there are shortages causing a real concern. **Farmers Guardian** finds out more.



In many parts of the country, 2025 has been a challenging forage growing season and, in some cases, winter stocks have already been depleted to compensate for reduced grazing.

Dr Phil Holder, of ED&F Man, says: "Where forage is limited, beef farmers need to make plans now to minimise the impact on production over the winter."

"Making small changes sooner will be more beneficial than major changes later in the season."

"Cattle perform 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

Planning ahead key to managing beef diets this winter

the situation as soon as possible so that the diet can remain as unchanged as possible throughout the winter."

He advises that it is imperative to carry out a stock check of forages in the clamp and in bale stacks.

He stresses the sooner this is done and there is a realistic picture of how stocks relate to expected requirements, the easier it will be to plan how to manage the situation.

He says: "Once you have assessed the forage available, you can compare this to requirements to identify any shortfall. Then you can plan how to tailor rations to meet this shortfall most efficiently and cost-effectively."

Feed less

"It might be that you feed less forage to all cattle throughout the winter."

"Alternatively you might decide to prioritise silage, particularly the better-quality material to finishing cattle or pregnant suckler cows."

"Finally, it might be an option to exclude silage altogether from young-stock rations. But the sooner you start

planning, the more effective the changes will be."

One option to help stretch silage stocks will be straw. Dr Holder advises that straw can provide the bulk and rumen fill as the basis of a ration.

Straw needs to be clean, fresh and palatable and that chopping will be an option to help increase intakes.

He says: "Every kilogram of straw fed will replace 4-5kg of silage depending on silage dry matter, but it is important to manage expectations."

"You must be realistic about intakes and 8-9kg of straw per day is likely to be tops. It is also important to acknowledge that straw alone will not fully replace even poorer quality silage."

"While straw will supply fibre and bulk, it is not high in many key nutrients. It is lower 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 as well as digestibility, promoting high levels of

rumen microbial activity. Molasses-based liquid feeds will help overcome the shortfalls when feeding straw."

Dr Holder 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 more highly rumen fermentable, increasing microbial protein production and stimulating rumen fungi to improve fibre digestion.

Additional

"In this way molasses-based liquids will help ensure higher straw intakes and better utilisation, but molasses alone will still mean diets will require additional protein supplementation."

"Incorporating straw and a protein molasses blend into beef diets now will help minimise the consequences of forage shortfalls," Dr Holder says.

"Liquids are easy to feed and reduce the risk of diet sorting and loss of expensive dry ingredients."



Dr Phil Holder