

# A guide to making the best use of dwindling forage stocks

Developing plans to make the best use of available feedstocks through to turnout will be crucial in the coming weeks. Now is the time to plan for the remainder of the winter.

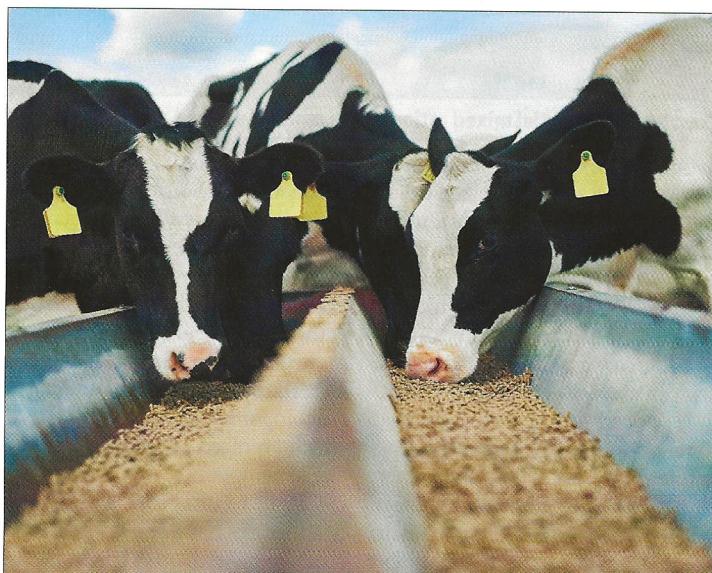
If you are farming in an area of the country with sufficient forage stocks, you may be able to look away now. However, in many regions forage stocks have been affected, with clamps opened earlier than usual, adding pressure to forage supplies.

"With around 100 days until most cows are likely to be out day and night, it will be vital to review all rations to ensure cows are fed effectively and that forage stocks will last until turnout," says Georgina Chapman at ED&F Man.

"Many dairy farms entered the winter with less than ideal stocks as a result of the difficult grass growing season and the need to open clamps early to supplement grazing. In addition, silage quality has varied considerably, which has affected how well cows have milked.

"With continued pressure on milk prices and margins, now is the time to audit forage stocks and modify diets to ensure cows are fed as cost-effectively as possible," she adds. "The sooner changes are made the smaller those changes will need to be, which is important as the rumen can take up to two weeks to adapt to changes in the diet. The bigger the changes the slower it will adapt, affecting performance."

Georgina urges farmers to measure all clamps to gain an accurate picture of available stocks and to make adjustments for expected wastage.



Well-balanced rations help stretch forage supplies and support intakes

"What you need to know is the silage you will have available to feed, not the silage in the clamps - so be realistic about levels of waste."

She also stresses the importance of regular silage analysis throughout the winter. Sample results continue to show significant variability in forage quality and composition, with variation between cuts and even fields within the same cut. Accounting for this variability is crucial when devising diets.

## “Be prepared to fine-tune diets.”

"Wide variations in dry matter are affecting how much silage needs to be fed and how quickly clamps are emptying. Drier silages with lower lactic acid and higher volatile fatty acid (VFA) levels are more prone to yeast and mould development, which can increase the risk of heating and spoilage, further compromising ration quality."

As diets heat up, palatability and overall ration quality declines, making cows less enthusiastic eaters. Signs of heating include

reduced dry matter intakes (DMI), increased wastage, reduced animal performance, and an unpleasant smell. In these situations, Georgina suggests considering adding Fresh-Guard, a ration conditioner for liquid feeds that's proven to prevent ration heating. By reducing undesirable microbial activity, it has been shown to increase DMI, improve animal performance and reduce feed wastage.

"Remember that if the diet heats up in the trough it is not just the silage that is spoiling," notes Georgina. "The total diet attractiveness and quality is being compromised, meaning financial consequences are greater."

Digestibility values have varied significantly this year, suggesting that some silages offer lower feed value. "Be prepared to fine-tune diets to take account of these factors, but also look closely at how forages will perform in the rumen, as this will influence the choice of supplements needed to balance forage and feed the rumen bugs."

For effective rumen function, diets must supply the nutrients required by rumen microbes, including both carbohydrates and protein. In addition to providing sufficient nutrient intake, the rate of fermentation must also be

considered. When rumen microbes receive the right nutrients at the right fermentation rate, fibre digestion is optimised and DMI is maximised.

"It will be important to look at the levels of total and rapidly fermentable carbohydrates (TFCs and RFCs) and protein in forages, and to adapt diets to achieve the correct balance," explains Georgina.

## “Straw is harder for rumen microbes to digest.”

"In general this winter we are seeing that while TFCs in forages are adequate, the proportion of RFCs, which fire up rumen fermentation, has declined. In practice this means that while cows are consuming similar carbohydrate levels, the speed and efficiency of rumen fermentation is compromised, which will in turn impact on rumen throughput and DMI."

### Prioritising silage

"The problem is made worse if both TFC and RFC levels are down, as this restricts rumen microbial activity and production of microbial protein, which is the most important protein source to the cow."

Armed with the latest forage analyses and accurate estimates of available stocks, rations can be re-evaluated to last through to turnout and avoid drastic dietary changes.

"How many cow feeding days do you have to budget for between now and the anticipated turnout? How much silage do you realistically have per cow feeding day? Is this adequate or do you need to make changes to the diets?"

Where stocks are tight, Georgina advises prioritising silage for freshly calved cows, while reducing inclusion rates to later lactation cows that are already in calf, replacing forage with a proportion of straw.

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**Georgina Chapman highlights the importance of proactive forage planning**

"Straw is harder for rumen microbes to digest, which can lead to reduced intakes and suboptimal performance, so supplying sufficient RFCs in the rest of the diet is crucial," she notes. Straw feeding, whether partially or fully replacing grass silage, presents challenges in palatability, digestibility, and protein availability.

However, high protein molasses blends can help overcome these issues by enhancing fibre digestion and providing rapidly fermentable energy and rumen degradable protein.

## **"A two-week adaptation period is recommended."**

Independent research at the South West Dairy Development Centre has shown that replacing 7.5kg of grass silage with 1.5kg of wheat straw and 1.5kg of Regumix; a highly palatable, molasses-based liquid that's rich in protein and energy, maintains production while preserving valuable silage stocks.

"Assuming 100 cows were put onto the straw and molasses diet, the saving would be 23t of grass silage per month, which could be crucial at the end of the winter," she calculates.

"When implementing straw-based rations, a two-week adaptation period is recommended, along with gradual dietary changes, a good, clean water supply and additional mineral supplementation. It is also important to ensure adequate rumen degradable protein is supplied."

Where silage stocks are adequate but forage analysis shows an

imbalance in fermentable energy or protein supply, molasses-based liquid feeds offer a rumen-friendly source of RFCs, says Georgina.

"While ground cereals are good value this winter for providing RFCs, excessive starch can increase the risk of sub-acute ruminal acidosis (SARA) as it can precipitate a fall in rumen pH.

"To mitigate this effect, increase the ration sugar levels to 6-8% using a molasses-based liquid feed in place of starch while holding overall starch and sugar levels."

Research has shown that this helps maintain an optimal rumen pH environment. "When fed a high sugar diet (8% DM) versus a low sugar diet (2.6%), cows spent 75% less time in acidotic conditions (pH<5.8) which reflects in more effective rumen fermentation and utilisation of the diet."

### **Maintaining rumen efficiency**

Molasses blends deliver rapidly fermentable sugars which energise rumen microbes more efficiently than starch, improving rumen function and overall ration digestibility, says Georgina.

Where rapidly fermentable protein is also lacking, molasses blends containing regulated-release protein can improve rumen synchrony and maintain rumen efficiency.

"By paying attention to rumen fermentation parameters it will be possible to help cows make the best use of the diet and produce milk as cost-effectively as possible," she adds.

"Molasses blends can significantly boost intakes due to their liquid nature and low substitution effect. They are highly palatable, encouraging animals to eat more - an essential driver of milk yield."

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