

Planning winter feeding tactics

Independent nutritionist Hefin Richards looks forward to the winter ahead and gives some feeding tips for dairy farmers facing the challenges of feeding their cows over the next six months.



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As we head into the winter of 2016/17 we are at last seeing milk price improvements on the back of 18 months or more of steady (or not so steady!) falls. The challenges faced by the majority of milk producers over the past 12 months have been horrendous and far reaching, and the industry will continue to feel the impact for months—if not years—to come. So what about the cows?

It is fair to say that many businesses have had to review priorities and slash costs wherever possible in order to try and survive milk prices in the low to mid-teens. In terms of feeding, it is also apparent that feed rates and the quality and cost of ingredients have been cut, and forage and grazing has been challenged to produce more for less.

But life is never easy and we are now heading into winter with a need to try and recoup lost margins through continued improvements in output efficiency.

In terms of forage production, to date, 2016 has been a curate's egg—good in parts! After a slow spring, grazing conditions in May were generally excellent and those who were rediscovering the art of grazing management had a fairly easy month, with adequate growth, and favourable weather. Cows grazed well, with dry backs and the combination of high dry matters and sugar, grass supported yields well as concentrates and buffer feeds were cut back or eliminated.

First cut silages were largely made in good condition and are analysing and generally feeding well. June turned all this on its head, grass growth rocketed, rainfall dominated most of the month and grass intakes and milk production fell away rapidly. Second cut silages were challenging to say the least, with rapid growth and then delayed and catchy harvesting conditions producing some very average material.

The combination of lower D value due to

late cutting and rapid growth, low sugars and limited wilting opportunities have left many with fibrous, wet, acidic material which is not a great combination for milk production. Subsequent grass cuts have been more encouraging with generally higher D values and better harvesting conditions.

Silage feeding tactics

Being able to access clamped forages simultaneously is a huge advantage where quality and characteristics are variable. Feeding a combination of high D value third cut with mature stemmier second cut is a much better strategy than having to switch the whole herd from one to the other mid-season. This also allows for better utilisation of the higher quality material by targeting the groups and months to feed for best return.

The advice as always is to get forages ana-



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