

Striving for superior silage

Production costs are up at least 60% per kilogram of dry matter pit silage harvested compared to 2021. Nonetheless, these Kilkenny farmers believe that quality silage is still good value for money.

Alan Dillon
Programme manager.

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Despite the painfully higher costs, particularly for fuel and fertiliser, calf-to-beef systems depend on quality silage. A dry matter digestibility (DMD) of at least 72 is essential.

This level of quality will enable growing or finishing animals to achieve the necessary levels of performance over winter.

Choose a strategy of going for more, bulkier, forage and the loss in quality will have to be compensated with hugely expensive concentrates.

One farm where the focus on producing excellent-quality silage has been mastered in recent years is that of father and son team Thomas and Peter O'Hanrahan, who operate a calf-to-beef system just outside Thomastown, Co Kilkenny.

Peter has been part of the Teagasc Green Acres calf-to-beef programme for the past number of years and will participate in the new Teagasc Dairy-Beef 500 programme, which will run for five years.

Outlining the plan for this year's silage crop, Peter said: "Prioritising silage quality has been a key focus on our farm and we are not going to move away from our targeted mid-May cutting date.

"This year's first-cut crop was fertilised with 3,000 gallons/ac of slurry and 80 units/ac of artificial nitrogen.

"In recent years, we have transitioned from a system where steers were slaughtered off grass during the third grazing season to one where the majority of animals are now winter finished.

"With this change, we've had to really focus on producing excellent-quality silage to ensure our steers achieve the 1kg/head/day target during the finishing period without having to feed too much meal.

"If we fail to produce excellent quality silage, we are not only facing the



Peter O'Hanrahan.

prospect of having to offer finishing steers additional concentrates, we will also have to feed more meals to weanlings to ensure they achieve the daily liveweight gain target of 0.6kg/head/day during their first winter."

With higher production costs, there may be some who believe that the best option would be to delay grass harvesting in order to achieve a higher bulk.

Peter said: "If we were to lose focus on silage quality in exchange for bulk, we'd be looking at a massive increase in the volumes of meal needed

to achieve the same levels of animal performance.

"If silage quality was to slip from an average of 72 DMD back to 68 DMD, we'd have to purchase an additional 36t of meal over the winter months. If, for argument's sake, concentrate was to hit €550/t next winter, this would mean an extra spend of close to €20,000 or €215/ha off our bottom line.

"With concentrate prices looking likely to be in this higher bracket this backend, we will be focusing on quality silage to counteract any price rises in the market."



Alan Dillon, Sean Cummins, Peter O'Hanrahan

Silage budgeting

Although focusing on quality is important, it only counts for one side of the equation. It's critical that a sufficient fodder is available to tide the farm through the winter months. This can only be evaluated through the completion of a fodder budget.

For the winter ahead, and including a buffer of one month, the O'Hanrahans need 295t (DM) of silage. Fortunately, 36t of this feed is already present in the yard as a carryover from last winter, so a production target of 259t has been set for the year ahead.

First-cut silage is expected to account for approximately 200t – the remainder will be harvested in the form of a second cut.

The decision on how much ground will be closed for second-cut will be evaluated once the first-cut harvest has been completed.

Commenting on budgeting, Peter said: "We are lucky in that our farm is very dry, which facilitates early turnout of younger stock and we began grazing in January this year.

"However, I like carrying a buffer of silage of at least one month. This covers us in case the spring is delayed or grass growth slows during a dry spell in the summer months.

"As we operate a spring-calf system, our demand for grass doesn't typically pick up until the second half of the year and that's why I like targeting the majority of the silage from first-cut."

Although the father and son team have transitioned to marketing the majority of animals out of the shed in the winter months, approximately 50 steers are turned back out for a third grazing season each year. With indications last December that fertiliser prices would be higher this

spring, they altered their system slightly. "The only real change we've made to the farm this year is reducing the number of older animals turned back out to grass for a third grazing season. This decision was made just before Christmas 2021 and it was driven by two factors.

"Firstly, the rising fertiliser prices, but secondly, market indications were also pointing to a relatively strong beef price during the month of April and thankfully this held true.

"These steers were within 100-120 days of finish, so a lot of the heavy lifting had been done during the previous year's grazing season.

"By moving these animals off-farm earlier, we freed up nearly 13ha of grazing ground that can be re-directed to first-cut silage or to grazing for yearling stock," says Peter. "Always go for quality is the lesson we have learned."