

fodder

Winter Feed 2024 Act now if supplies are tight

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On average, grass growth this year is down by 0.75 to 1 tonne grass DM per hectare (or 2 tonnes fresh grass per acre) compared to the long-term average.

This drop is mostly due to lower supply of background nitrogen from soil mineralisation, arising from less solar radiation (sunshine...) during May, June and July.

Fertiliser rates are also back somewhat which will have played a part. The fertiliser type used, however, had no impact on grass yield.

The net effect is that more dairy and drystock farms than usual have reported winter feed budget shortages, and a greater risk of feed problems next spring. From previous surveys, we usually see 10-15% of dairy and drystock farms go into the winter short of feed with an intention to buy on the open market.

The figure was closer to 25-30% in our provisional survey in July this year. This means that demand for purchased forage is likely to be higher than usual.

Many farms that were initially tight have taken remedial steps like taking third-cut silage. This should close the gap to a fair extent.

However, for those farms still in a deficit, action to save or source feed is urgent.

It would be unwise to rely on benevolent spring weather or to assume feed will be available at an acceptable price next February.

Five key actions to take

1 Find out where you stand by completing a simple winter feed budget

There are numerous options available. There's a dynamic feed budgeting tool in PastureBase Ireland or you could use a simple paper version as outlined in the example. The objective is simple: to quantify any gap between supply and demand.

Once you have gathered stock numbers, counted bales and measured pits your Teagasc advisor will help with the calculations. Do not ignore seemingly small gaps in the budget because they could prove very significant by the end of the winter.

Aim for a 10% reserve rather than being content with a 10% shortfall.

2 Make a feed plan using available options

Once the size of deficit is calculated, consider your options. Start sooner rather than later, particularly if shortfalls are 15% or more. It is easier and less stressful to sort out any problems before winter starts.

Consider the practicalities of different feed options as well as the cost per tonne. If there will be extra labour,

transport and machinery costs involved, these should be factored in.

For example, feeding 2-3kg of straight concentrate ingredients may mean extra feed space is needed. Some farms are not set up to feed out extra concentrates at the feed barrier. Remember that to make forage savings, forage intake must be restricted on a 1:1 dry matter basis, e.g. 1kg hulls should replace 4-5kg fresh silage.

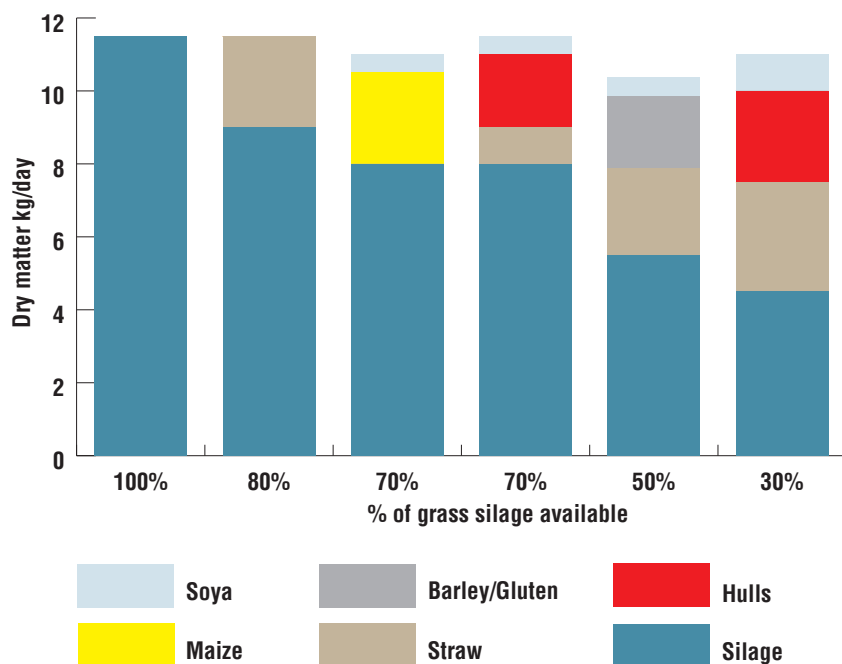
Cows will not significantly restrict their silage intake in response to 3-4kg concentrate, so there is a good



Eddie Mulligan,
Teagasc Grange.

Figure 1

Dry cow diet options



option will deliver the correct diet for the herd. The decision as to which diet to use will depend on the individual farm's circumstances and feed availability. Always test your own and purchased forages to make sure your diets are correct.

3 Consider early culling

Earlier offloading of animals already marked for culling will certainly help to address a feed deficit. It is not a popular suggestion with some farmers, but it should always be considered before paying out cash to buy feed.

Early culling is a tactical or short-term step, with a view to restoring numbers once feed availability issues are resolved. The key question is the value of retaining animals versus the cost of purchasing feed to retain them for longer.

The savings on feed can be significant. Selling five cows in mid-September will save about 60 tonnes of forage compared to culling next March, which is very significant for a farm with a severe shortage.

The economics of early culling are more favourable where purchased feed is expensive and of low quality, and/or the daily productivity of the stock is low.

4 Manage autumn grass with next spring in mind

Where late autumn weather conditions are good and forage supply is tight, there is always a temptation to continue grazing into November, especially with milking cows or lighter stock. However, this ignores the value of having a good cover of spring grass in a few months' time. Even in a very bad spring like we had this year, the value of having spring grass in the diet was evident.

Farms on free-draining soils should have 65-70% of area closed by 1 November. Farms with heavier soils should be at 80%. Do not re-graze in November, instead deal with any forage shortage issue and keep the grass in reserve for spring.

5 Address any cash issues

Finally, a key outcome of our survey this summer was that a high proportion of farmers had cashflow concerns, and felt that cash was the main limitation to taking action on feed budget issues.

This may mean that some farms will postpone taking corrective actions due to a lack of cash. In such circumstances, the finance issue will need to be resolved before a winter feed deficit is tackled. Remember, there are always options, and two heads are better than one so, again, contact your local Teagasc advisor.

Figure 2

Section 1: What fodder is required on the farm?

Animal Type	A No. of stock to be kept over winter	B Number of months	C Pit silage needed/ animal/month	Total tonnes of silage needed- multiply AxBxC
Dairy cow				
Suckler cows				
0-1 year old				
1-2 year old				
2+ year old				
Ewes				
Total tonnes needed				Tonnes <input type="text"/>
or				
Total tonnes needed (tonnes multiply by 1.1)				Tonnes <input type="text"/>

Section 2: How much silage is in the yard?

Farm	A	Pit silage	<input type="text"/>
With pit	B	Bales-in the yard	<input type="text"/>
And bale	C	Bales converted of pit silage (Multiply B by 0.9)	<input type="text"/>
Silage	D	Total silage (A+C)	<input type="text"/>
Farm with Bale silage only	E	Total bales	<input type="text"/>

¹Pit silage (length x settled height) metres 1.35 = tonnes (t) equivalent

chance you will end up with over-conditioned cows and little saving of silage. In short, it's not easy to restrict silage and replace it with concentrates.

Allow for up to 10% spoilage and losses with wet bulk feeds. What looks like cheap feed could be expensive when all costs have been accounted for. In most circumstances, the simplest and most practical means of filling a forage gap is with more purchased forage – pit silage, maize,

bales, hay, etc. Compare costs on a dry matter, and quality, basis.

A big risk with purchasing forage of poor quality is that animal performance will suffer.

Keep the feed energy and protein targets for each class of stock in mind, and make sure diets meet the required spec.

In Figure 1, a range of diets are shown that meet the energy (8.5 UFL), protein (650g PDI) and fibre (>30% NDF) needs of dry dairy cows. Each