



Newsletter 2018, Q1

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Running out of forage this winter?

There are reports from the north of England and Scotland that farms are struggling with forage stocks this winter. The poor summer in 2017 meant that many farms did not make as many cuts of silage as usual – there are reports that some did not even manage to get 2nd cut silage in. With cows housed from the middle of the summer due to poor ground conditions, many cows have already eaten their way through last year's forage. Even sheep farmers are struggling, with many having to start feeding forage earlier due to snow cover in December. With some farms already running low in forage, now is the time to speak with your feed advisor and/or vet, and work out a plan for the rest of the winter feeding period:

- 1) **Work out how much silage you have at present, and how long it is going to last.** There are some simple calculations based on the volume of the silage clamp or number of bales and your feed advisor can help with this.
- 2) **Get your silage analysed.** Cows will get through 20% DM grass silage twice as quickly as 40% DM silage.....
- 3) **Make any diet alterations as soon as practical to try and keep the diet consistent for the rest**

of the winter housing period. It is much better for the milking cows to be eating ½ kg straw now, rather than having to feed 3 kg straw in March when the clamp is almost finished.

4) **Reduce feed requirements as much as practical**, by culling out any problem cows with high cell counts or lameness. Selling cows or pregnant heifers can help with cashflow as well as reducing the amount of feed needed.

5) **Prioritise the best quality forage** for fresh calvers and high yielding dairy cows, as well as animals in late pregnancy: "close up" dry cows, beef and sheep in the last month of pregnancy. Other groups such as "far off" dry cows and youngstock can make do with poorer quality forage if necessary.

6) Given the current price of straw, **big bale silage or haylage** may be more cost-effective options if forage needs to be bought in.

7) **Moist feeds** can be a cost-effective forage replacer. Brewer's grains and draff are also a good source of protein, and can enhance the palatability of the overall ration. Loads can be clamped if necessary for longer-term storage.

Monitoring animal performance is key to making sure that any alterations work as planned. **Body condition scoring** is vital, as spring calving beef cows and sheep in good body condition will have body reserves to meet any moderate nutritional shortfalls.

Blood testing is an extremely useful method of "asking the animals what they think of the diet", and will give you quick answers to identify any nutritional shortfalls. For example, poor quality silage may result in low protein intakes, which can affect cow and calf health. Blood testing will pick this up, enabling changes to be made before calving or lambing starts.



Stillbirths in dairy cows

Surveys of stillbirths in dairy cows from across the world estimate that **between 2 and 10% of calves are lost around the time of calving**. The exact definition of a stillbirth can vary, with deaths up to 48 hours old being included in most data. Regardless of the exact definition, it is estimated that **approximately 90% of stillborn calves were alive at the start of calving**, hence there is plenty of scope for improvement to reduce the numbers of stillborn calves.

The causes of stillbirths are varied, and there may be more than one factor that contributes to a calf's death. Reasons found vary significantly, however, **difficulties at calving, birth defects and oxygen starvation (anoxia)** are consistently reported as common causes.

Major infectious diseases that cause abortions can also be associated with stillbirths e.g. Neospora, Leptospirosis and Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis (IBR), hence underlining the importance of controlling these diseases.

There are also a number of nutritional factors associated with stillbirths in cattle. Over-conditioned cows are more likely to have difficulty calving, whilst cows with clinical and subclinical milk fever are likely to have a prolonged calving, hence increasing the risks to the calf. Furthermore, iodine and selenium deficiencies are associated with stillbirths due to the reduced viability of the newborn calf.

There is some debate as to whether stillbirth rates are increasing amongst high yielding Holsteins and what may underpin this increase.

There are also varying opinions amongst stockmen as to how proactive they should be during calving. It is still generally advised that where possible, cows are left to calve unaided. Assistance should be provided if a cow is pushing for more than 30 minutes without any progress, or if she fails to make progress after 2 hours of starting to calve (1 hour for heifers). It can, however, be difficult to accurately estimate

when a cow starts to calve. In a study published last year by the University of Guelph in Canada, intervention 15 minutes after the feet were first seen resulted in significantly improved outcomes for the calf compared to calves that were assisted after 60 minutes. Unfortunately, this study did not look at the impact of the increased level of intervention on cow outcomes, and so it is difficult to understand the cost-benefit of early intervention to the herd overall.

Whilst genetics have been shown to impact on stillbirth rates, it is difficult to justify selecting heavily on this trait given the competing pressures when choosing a bull. For this reason, daughter stillbirth PTAs are included in a bull's Total Performance Index.

Unfortunately, many herds do not accurately record stillbirths and calf losses and so we have a poor understanding as to whether it is a major problem. In herds that do record, it is not uncommon to see stillbirth rates of 1% in cows, whilst herds with a stillbirth rate of more than 3% for cows and 8% for heifers should consider investigating further.

We would be interested to hear about the stillbirth rate on your farm if you have 2 minutes to complete our online survey:

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/ZZBRW5D>



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