

USING CONCENTRATES WISELY

Be careful when feeding concentrates at over £200/tonne.

In the past it was easy to use concentrates, as the cost of dry matter was similar to conserved forages. Remember wheat at £60/tonne? Now however, we are faced with concentrates at double the price compared to 12 months ago. With concentrates at over £200/tonne this spring, it may be tempting to cut back drastically and rely on grazing. This can be the correct decision for cows in late lactation, but it would be disastrous for high yielding early lactation cows.

So how can we save money by judicious use of concentrates?

Grouping the milkers

Assuming we are talking about a spread out calving pattern, then we need to split the cows to allow a more targeted approach to allocating concentrates. Before you turn the page because you do not like where I am going with this, just read on for a while and see how much you could save. Then make your decision based on financial gain against inconvenience.

Take a scenario of a herd of 150 cows in milk. To feed the high yielding portion we need to feed a buffer of conserved forages and add some concentrates. A cow giving 40 litres will require 7kgs of concentrates in the parlour and about 5kgs in the buffer, which will contain about 25kgs of forage.

If we are going to supply enough energy to the high group we need this buffer with 5kgs of concentrates. So if we feed the herd as one group, the lower yielding portion is getting the same mix but does not need it.

This could be a waste of forage and very costly concentrates.

Feed	Kilos/day	Cost (£/day)
Silage	25 (£25/tonne)	0.62
Concentrates	5 (£210/tonne)	1.05
Total		1.67

If half the milking portion are in the low group in good condition, and a large percentage in calf they can milk off grass and be challenged to produce milk cheaply. 75 cows x £1.67/day = £125.25. Multiply that by 30 days and the saving is £3757 per month. Have I got your attention now? I know it can be a nuisance having the cows in two groups but I think the saving makes it worth the inconvenience. This allows you to challenge the low group on grass. If they are in good body condition, make them work hard by taking a couple of litres more from grass than you normally would. To ensure you do not overdo it, record body condition of the top twelve in the low group twice a month and adjust feeding if there is weight loss.

Another reason this makes sense is that you probably have a few (or quite a few) cows that have extended calving intervals. Paying for forage and concentrates to pile on body condition on these girls is just plain daft. The subsequent health problems and disappointing fertility from over conditioned cows is well documented.

Taking a different view, a good argument for keeping cows in one group is that moving cows from the highs to the lows will cause some stress and usually knocks milk yields. But this is less of a problem when cows are at grass as they have much more room to get away from the dominant cows and do not have to compete at a feed barrier. Moving cows in larger numbers as the attention on individuals is diluted can further reduce stress.

The same rules apply to TMR systems. There is less flexibility without parlour feeding the low group, but there is 7kgs saved by having a 25-litre group as well as a 40-litre group. This also allows specific allocation of supplements such as yeasts and fats.

Protein

We rarely need to feed concentrates above 18%. Sometimes 14% is a better balance at grass depending on what is in the buffer feed. 1% protein in dairy cake costs about £2/tonne; so do not waste money by overfeeding protein.

Parlour feeding

Regularly check how much is being dropped into the feeders and recalibrate. Adjust feed levels immediately after each recording. Are you one of those who still feed at a higher level than warranted because she is not in calf? It's too late now as the first three weeks following calving determines fertility efficiency. Do you keep feed rates up because you think she has dropped in yield a bit more than you expected? Check what is a realistic drop from lactation curve graphs and feed accordingly.

Simple guide to yields at days in milk

305 day yield	9000 litres	7000 litres
Days from calving	L/day	L/day
1-30	32.5	25.0
31-60	38.5	30.0
61-90	37.5	29.0
91-120	34.5	27.0

121-150	32.0	25.0
151-180	29.5	23.0
181-210	27.0	21.0
211-240	24.5	19.0
241-270	22.0	17.0
271+	19.5	15.0

Magic potions

Do you need all the supplements and cure-alls in a blend or dairy cake? In the majority of cases they are not needed and they usually cost more added in than buying separately. Some yeasts and fats are beneficial, but you must target feed them.

Minerals

Most dairy farmers overfeed minerals. I advise my clients to feed a good standard mineral with no fancy bits and pieces. This has reduced the usage and cost dramatically. Regular blood profiling and liver biopsies confirm adequate levels are being fed.

Alternative feeds

Replace some concentrates with other feeds as long as they are dry enough. If you are aiming for high intakes of grazing and/or your buffer conserved forages are wet, feeding wet products such as brewers' grains, wet pulp etc. will reduce dry matter intakes. However, if grazing is limited and forages are dry you may reduce costs by replacing some concentrates with Trafford Gold, Vitagold and other cost effective, drier products.

Blood profiles

Use blood profiling to check you are not underfeeding or overfeeding, and that protein and minerals levels are OK

Silage

Your greatest saving will come from making good quality, young, dry silage. I know you always try to make the best silage possible, but here is an idea - follow all the guidelines as if you are making silage for the first time. You may be amazed at how many corners you have been cutting! The difference between good and average silage can be as much as 4 litres/cow/day. That saves 550 kgs concentrates/cow/year, which is worth about £120/cow.

We could be paying over £200/tonne for concentrates for quite a while. Making changes now will minimise the pain of high feed costs.

Copyright © Robert Cope