

Controlling the costs of milk production - Controlling Feed Costs

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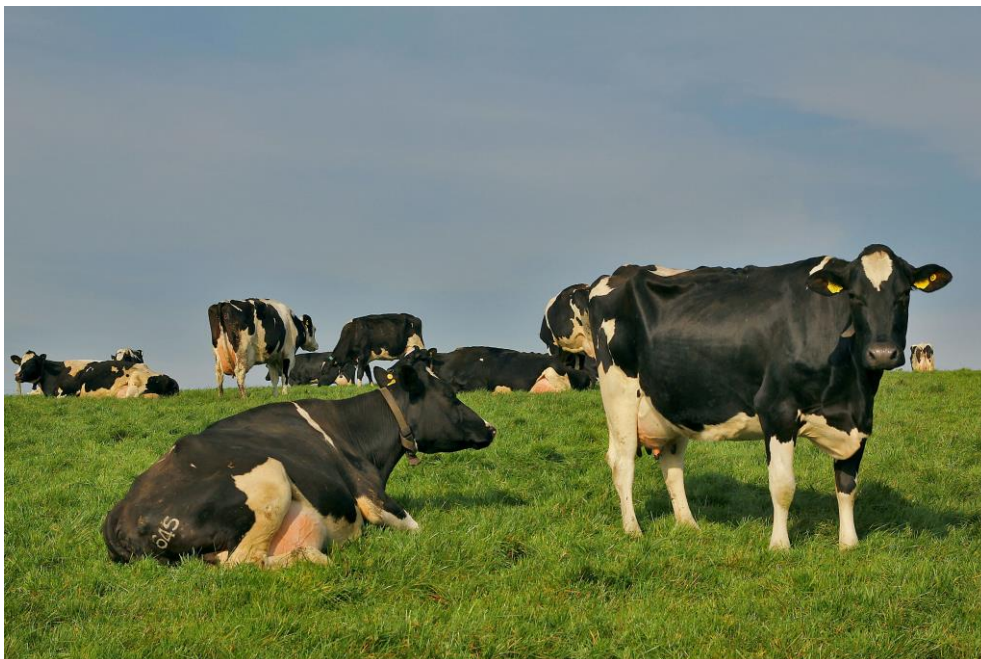
Never in any of our lifetimes has there been a public health crisis like the one the world is currently experiencing. Northern Ireland dairying is subject to world market forces as a net exporter of milk products. Dairy farmers can do little to influence the market price paid, however you can control your cost of milk production.

This is the first in a series of three articles which will look at options to control costs on Northern Ireland dairy farms in order to remain resilient throughout the current crisis.

Grazing

Grass is our cheapest feed; it comes in at around $\frac{1}{4}$ of the cost of concentrates per kilogram of dry matter (kg DM). Many of us, however, have lost confidence in its potential to produce milk. 1kg DM of grass has the same energy content as 1kg of concentrate and so has the same potential for milk production. The greatest variable in grass is its dry matter and the corresponding impact on dry matter intakes (DMI).

It is important to select the cows in your herd to consider for grazing. Due to the yield of some cows and their pregnancy status it may be counterproductive to graze all cows in the herd. However, in the vast majority of herds there will be a group of cows suitable for grazing. Spring calving systems will be set up to maximise the use of grass. For those higher yielding spring systems input of concentrate can be re-evaluated during breeding to ensure energy deficit is minimised and conception rate is maximised. Autumn calved cows (150-200 days in milk) will be past the peak of production and should be confirmed in calf. Cows in this category yielding 30 litres or less should be grouped for grazing - even if this is only during the day.



The two areas where grass can reduce cost are firstly saving on silage feeding and secondly reducing the protein requirement from concentrates. Current grass protein levels are around

19%, with ME content around 11.5-12 MJ/kg DM. This energy content is equivalent to good first cut silage and the protein around 4% higher. Grazing cows for 6 hours and assuming 6kg DMI could represent a feed cost saving of 37p/cow/day or £1110 for 100 cows each month. It is important that you match the predicted dry matter intake of the batch of cows that you are grazing with the dry matter that can be grown on the allocated grazing area. A stocking rate of 5 cows per hectare (2 cows per acre) is a reasonable benchmark for a full time grazed herd. This will of course be affected by fertiliser applications, age of the sward, grass utilisation and whether cows are receiving any buffer feed.

Confined systems

Where cows cannot be grazed for management reasons it is essential to evaluate the ration regularly to ensure cows are not being overfed in terms of overall concentrate input or concentrate protein content. Where the herd is diet fed, ideally this will be managed through two cow groups with high yielders and stale cows batched separately. The TMR diet should always be formulated to ensure the lowest yielding cow in the batch is not being overfed – most overfeeding of dairy cows happens during late lactation. Don't forget to include in-parlour minimum feed rates when calculating the feed going into lower yielding cows.

How much is the parlour feeding?

Regardless of your system of production, the yield of your cows, when they calve or your preference for grass or TMR feeding there is one place you should all check for over feeding of concentrates. You or your nutritionist has worked out how much concentrate cows should be fed in the parlour, therefore it is important to check this periodically. Simply place a freezer bag under a number of the feed hoppers and dispense 0.5kg or the minimum amount. Weigh this and compare it to the amount you or the computer system assumes this amount to be. Completing this exercise with a farmer in February this year revealed that whilst this amount was assumed to be 500g by the parlour computer the cup was dispensing almost 600g in most cases. A cow requiring 8kg in this case would be fed 9.6kg per day. For 100 cows this error would amount to 1120kg of extra concentrate being fed per week or £1248 per month of unnecessary feed cost.

Summary

1. Make use of grass with a batch of suitable cows if not the whole herd.
2. Review the protein content of your parlour concentrate or blend.
3. Batch cows managed on indoor systems by yield.
4. Formulate TMR rations to ensure the lowest yielders are not overfed.
5. Check that your parlour is feeding what you think it is.
6. If you are in a Business Development Group your CAFRE Dairying Adviser is still working and can guide you through implementing any of the steps above.

Covid – 19 Update

Farmers are adopting new approaches in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is essential to follow the latest advice outlined on the [Public Health Agency website](#). The site is updated daily and provides practical advice and important information for you and your family in these very difficult, challenging times.

