

Focus on the fodder crisis

Fodder crisis and increased farm population size – what can we learn from the pig and poultry industries, asks Pat Kirwan MVB Cert PM

Increased farm populations of cattle and, particularly, cows have come into focus during the past few months with the hot summer and the almost total collapse in grass growth. Intensification has brought its difficulties, some that could have been foreseen and others that have blindsided the dairy industry. Could some of the problems that have been encountered been better anticipated and could lessons be learned from the pig and poultry industries where intensification is the norm?

OVERVIEW

The pig and poultry industries have progressively become more intensive over the past 20 years. 'The big have got bigger and the small have got out!' The first major point to make about these intensive livestock industries is that all inputs come through the farm gate. All feed is purchased as the norm and not as a reaction to the absence of the grass growth. Each pig or chicken is given a daily allowance, and this is calculable in advance of each day, week or month. Dairy farmers have improved significantly on their daily measurements of grass growth and availability over the past few years but the fodder crisis of 2018, hot on the heels of the extended winter of 2017 and the absence of a spring in 2018, stretched their ability to forecast grass growth and plan daily use and surplus conservation strategies. There just wasn't any grass remaining.

Dairy farmers, especially those that have expanded, needed to look outside the farm gate for feed solutions. Whole crop wheat and barley was one such solution, used by some dairy farmers to bridge the fodder gap. There is a sort of 'robbing Peter to pay Paul' about the use of arable silage crops to address fodder shortages.

As a consequence, beef and dairy feed rations for the coming winter may see significant price increases owing to the shortage of feed-grade wheat and barley that has already been ensiled by their dairy neighbours to address their fodder deficiencies.

Dairy farmers have also purchased much of the straw from their tillage neighbours this year as it has both a feed value and is an essential fibre source, particularly when mixing in feed wagons occurs on dairy farms.

Some farms are also looking at catch crops such as rapeseed, turnips, suedes and others roots, sown now in harvested land to bridge the fodder deficit in the early months of 2019.

Zero-grazing as a strategy will also be used in the late growing season this year to try to maximise the value of late grass growth and reduce the losses in grass associated with both contamination and poaching. All these strategies should be encouraged at this stage of the growing season in an attempt to address some of the remaining fodder imbalance. Alternative feeds, straights and by-products might also be considered as a different feed source for cows in the coming winter and spring. Alfalfa was imported in some areas in the winter of 2017/18 as a reaction to poor weather and a long winter. Perhaps a proactive look at Alfalfa imports could be taken at this stage of the season and advance orders placed for products like this or maize could be made.

CULLING

Many are loathe to discuss the possibility of culling as a strategy that can be used now to address some of the shortcomings in the fodder situation. However, this strategy has long been used in the pig and poultry industries in times of surplus or in times of poor returns. The current fodder crisis could be deemed sufficiently serious to consider the possibility of a cull or an accelerated retirement of dairy cows that are approaching the end of their productive lives.

Sows are rarely retained on pig-breeding units beyond sixth parity. By this stage they have produced upwards of 100 piglets and may have weaned up to 90 piglets in their short lives. However, continuous production at these high levels after sixth parity is unsustainable. Sows will eventually disappoint in terms of numbers born or numbers born dead or quality of piglet or quality of milk.

Conception rates of 95% are achievable in pig production with farrowing rates thereafter of 90%+. The loss between conception and farrowing is made up of natural pregnancy losses plus a degree of culling of pregnant sows. A pig unit has a farrowing target per week. If he exceeds this target (based on the number of available farrowing spaces) then the system comes under pressure. Hence, he has free-rein to address surplus pregnancies through premature culling of older sows, those who have disappointed once, those who might be lame, have poor body condition or are poor mothers.

Culling is not an alien concept in poultry either, particularly in layer and broiler breeder flocks. If the market conditions are poor or if there is a reduced demand for the eggs, then

a flock can be pulled from production early and cashed in. Poultry flocks are not permitted to moult and enter a second cycle of production in Ireland because of strict adherence to Salmonella control programmes, which found, in the past, that the stress associated with moulting often precipitated outbreaks of Salmonellosis.

Cows are no different to sows. Their output peaks during the third and fourth lactation and declines, thereafter. In these difficult times, and prior to housing for the coming winter I would advocate:

1. All cows be scanned now to see if they are in calf. This is earlier for scanning than other years but reflects the emergency facing many dairy enterprises. Those cows not in calf at this stage should be immediately culled to reduce the stock levels on the farm;
2. All cows that have disappointed through incidence of lameness or mastitis or high cell counts should also be considered for culling;
3. Similarly, those that suffered from dystocia in the past should be reviewed and culled where practicable;
4. All older cows, beyond the sixth lactation, should be looked at in terms of their milk solids, butter fat and milk protein. Those that have lower outputs of quality milk should also be culled; and
5. In farms where there are mixed enterprises of beef suckling cows or sheep, a similar strategy could be employed to ensure that no surplus mouths are present during the coming winter.

CONCLUSION

The rapid expansion of the dairy herd since the abolition of milk quotas in 2015 has not been without pain. A price collapse in 2016 was followed by a year with the poorest growing conditions on record in 2017 (but with good prices) followed by the longest

winter in 2017/18 and the hottest summer since 1976 in 2018 and marginal prices for output. Dairy farmers must cut their cloth according to their measure. Unbridled expansion will inevitably lead to serious market instability and increased frequency of boom and bust cycles.

Alternative fodder conservation strategies will have to be undertaken to try and minimise the current market and fodder instability. Like the pig and the poultry industries, farms that have expanded rapidly will have to look in a diverse range of areas to address current shortcomings. Culling, though an unpalatable concept, is just one of the strategies that may have to be considered to address empty silage pits and feed stores in the winter of 2018/19.

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