

Pros and cons of autumn grazing for beef and dairy

SUCCESSFULLY utilising autumn grass, whether it be for finishing beef or extending the grazing period for dairy cattle, depends on the type and layout of the farm, soil types, weather, and growing conditions, the production system and appropriate grass types and grassland management.

The question should always be "do I produce sufficient quality autumn grass to achieve optimal outputs", be that milk production or daily live weight gain.

Is autumn grass right for everyone?

Extended autumn grazing is ideally suited to low-cost systems of milk production based on spring calving. However, the principles can be applied to all-year and autumn calving dairy herds, and even high-yielding herds, but depend on a balance of grazed and conserved forage to maintain high dry matter intakes.

Considerations in beef finishing systems include breed type, age and anticipated time of sale. Smaller-framed native breeds are better suited than larger continental breeds which likely require finishing in a housing system or on supplemental concentrates.

Younger, more rapidly growing cattle, will not lay down sufficient fat cover to achieve premium slaughter grades, so more mature, heavier animals will fatten more efficiently off grass.

Maximising outputs off

NORTHERN FARMER VET

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autumn grass not only requires good quality grasses and pastures, but also needs optimal management of sward length – getting the most out of the current grazing, but also ensuring best sward quality at the next grazing.

Sward should be grazed, rather than long and stemmy. General heights for autumn grazing are 9-10 cm to maximise intakes to support the full productive potential of grass.

Essentially autumn grass has a higher DM intake/production output ratio than spring grass. A DM intake of 18kg spring grass can support 27 litres/day of milk but to achieve 14 litres/day off autumn grass, intakes need to be at least 12.5kg to achieve this optimal potential off grass.

What are the advantages of autumn grass or extended grazing?

Extending autumn grazing will lead to savings in silage, with only two to three hours a day at pasture making a significant difference.

Also, if the grass is of good quality and conditions or intakes are good, this can equate to up to two kilograms of concentrates, thus reducing feed costs. There are also the added bonuses of less slurry,

decreased housing and labour costs due to the longer grazing periods.

For beef systems, grass grazed at the optimum sward length can compensate for 1.6kg of concentrate and, if the housing period is reduced, bedding and housing costs will be cut and the risk of housing-related diseases, such as pneumonia in youngstock will be lessened.

What are some of the pitfalls?

Extending the grazing into autumn is not without its pitfalls. Poaching and sward compaction are the greatest risks, particularly on heavy soils, which will reduce subsequent grass production.

This is especially true of dairy herds and good, well-drained tracks and gateways with good cow flow are essential to minimise lameness, mastitis and enhance animal movement.

There is also the need to supplement minerals and magnesium to maintain fertility and prevent grass staggers.

Remember, in times of wet weather and low dry matter of grass, intakes can be reduced by up to 15 per cent, so additional concentrate feeding will be necessary. To optimise dry matter intakes and achieve full benefits, multiple paddocks are neces-



ADVICE:

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sary for rapid rotations.

The number of paddocks and, crucially, rotations needs to be altered according to grass growth topping or bale-silaging might be necessary in periods of rapid grass growth or additional paddocks might be necessary in slow growth periods to slow the rotations.

Any considerations for the health of my animals?

Keeping cows out longer in the autumn can have a positive impact on the health and welfare of cattle and, especially, lessen the impact of housing provided the conditions are optimal.

However the risk of lameness, mastitis and soiling can

be increased and obviously grass staggers is always a high risk on autumn grass.

Wet weather and low dry matters can influence rumen health, energy intakes and body condition, so supplemental fibre and concentrates might be necessary to optimise rumen health and maintain body condition.

Government urged to speed up release of sheep vaccine

THE Government has been urged to rush through a vaccine to protect sheep from the Schmallenberg virus.

The National Sheep Association (NSA) and Sheep Veterinary Society (SVS) know that a vaccine has been developed.

However, it will not be released until it has gone through the approval process with the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD).

But, following Defra's recent warning that the virus was again circulating in

Britain, the NSA and SVS have called for an early release of the vaccine.

They said: "As tupping time approaches – the most critical infective period being the first 30 days of pregnancy, and a three- to six-week period between vaccination and immunity – it is important that this vaccine is made available as early as possible.

"Midge control is difficult to achieve, and other control policies are equally difficult in practical terms except for vaccination. We desperately

need this vaccine available for the breeding season and would like to offer any help we can to enable VMD to achieve this end."

Phil Stocker, NSA chief executive, said "If we are to contain this virus, then the benefits of having a vaccine available to cover at least part of this year's tupping will be hugely valuable.

"NSA would urge the VMD to do all the necessary checks, but to proceed as fast as possible so as not to miss this season entirely."

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