

# MEASURING PERFORMANCE AND REACHING YOUR HERD'S FULL POTENTIAL

#### I find myself starting in the same vein year after year! No two being the same.

Spring 2025 is looking like one of the kindest of turnouts with cows actually staying out! Grazing has got off to an early start, however, the cold nights are supressing the regrowth, coupled with the absolute irony that we could actually do with some rain!!! Early spread fertiliser still sitting on the ground with slurry not being washed is testament to the weather we are having.

The spring grazers among us are demonstrating true resilience in a market that doesn't want spring milk, and I commend them for this. It is testament to their focus on a tight calving block, good fertility, and maximising yield from forage, something all systems need to mimic.

Data is very important. If we don't measure, then how do we know we are improving? Below are some of the key targets:

#### I. SIX-WEEK IN CALF RATE (%)

Good fertility is key to the profitability of a block-calving herd. The block should be frontloaded with heifer replacements to ensure even group growth. Ideally, heifers should calve within 2-3 weeks, and 85-90% of cows and heifers should calve in the first six weeks followed by all animals calved within 9-12 weeks.

#### 2. EMPTY RATE (%)

It can be difficult to keep this low as the block gets tight, but the target should be >10% of animals that fail to conceive or calve too late and don't get rebred.

The very best operators are achieving less than 6%.

#### 3. HERD REPLACEMENT RATE (%)

To maintain a healthy herd, we should aim to replace 18-20% of the herd annually.

Increasing herd longevity means fewer replacements are needed which lowers rearing costs and improves lifetime profitability. This also lowers your environmental impact.

### 4. MILK YIELD FROM FORAGE (LITRES)

To calculate this, multiply the total amount of concentrate fed by 11.5ME and divide this figure by 5.5MJ (energy taken to produce one litre of milk). Then, subtract the amount of milk produced per cow per year.

For example:

1,000 (kg of cake) x 11.5ME /5.5MJ – 5,500litres = 3,409 litres from forage.

More than 50% of milk from forage is good. There is a valid argument for correcting fat and protein within the calculation because the higher quality milk requires more energy to produce it. Jerseys, as an example, would be 6-6.5MJ per litre.

#### 5. CONCEPTION RATE (%)

Anything over 60% for all animals is very good. We would hope for a much higher conception rate for in-calf heifers and younger parity animals, with clients this year achieving 70-90% within these groups.

**Feeding to achieve good performance** So, the question is: how do we achieve these remarkable figures?

Dry cow management is the foundation stone of good reproductive performance.



Richard Waters Dairy Consultant 07467 955 130

Regardless of your feeding system, the aim is to get her off to a flying start.

If we let her down

during transition,

then her chances

of staying in the

block are very

limited.

Early lactation nutrition is sometimes overlooked. To expect a cow, who has carried a calf for nine months, to calve and then go out in a field of grass and fill up is totally impossible. She will mobilise all fat reserves she has, and then when she needs it, she won't come bulling or conceive.

Reluctance to feed early lactation cows is a false economy. I expect the model is driven by low input but, as we have seen multiple times, the time to do this is after the cow is pregnant and not before.

If you are aiming to feed a lower amount of compound/blend, then please go for the best you can afford. Graze Pro is our preferred option for this Spring /Summer.

Graze Pro has been specially formulated for this exact purpose. It is a highly digestible fibre diet with great glucose precursors to encourage milk production with minimal weight loss. It contains soya and sugar beet, both known to feed extremely well alongside grass.

Please don't hesitate to contact your local Harpers Feed Specialist for our benchmarked costing services, grass/forage samples, mineral audits and nutrition advice.

# FARMING<br/>THOUGHTSMAJOR MARKET<br/>CONCERNS REMAIN

#### Milking cows have certainly turned on the tap since Christmas cows are milking well everywhere with good milk solids.

I think there maybe a bump in the road over Q2 milk prices, but long term, milk pricing is looking good. Milk production in Europe and China is down, cow and heifer numbers on British and Irish farms are down as well.

It is also the case in the beef sector. Suckler cow number are also way down on British and Irish farms, and a lot of Irish youngstock have been exported, therefore beef long term won't hit UK shores. With the ewe population in the UK so low, lamb prices should hold up going forward.

Everything is looking good in the ruminant sector.

Our farm gate prices will have to remain high going forward, because the government has no money. Therefore future proof your business to deal with no subsides, like the pig and poultry sector because they will be shifting

our support money to the NHS and Schools.

We have had 5 well attended sheep meetings this winter and also a big thank you to the 'Kirk' and 'Keat' family for hosting 2 dairy farm days.



#### Trump's tariffs are causing volatility and uncertainty across ingredients, changing global trade flows.

The biggest effect of the "tit for tat" tariffs has been hedge fund managers reducing their exposure and selling their long positions, which has resulted in the reduction of futures pricing.

The dollar has weakened, with the pound touching 1.30 against the dollar this month and there are fears the US will enter recession.

UK wheat prices remain stagnant, but bigger premiums are having to be paid for wheat above the futures, both new and old crop due to lack of sellers. New crop remains a hefty premium over old with around a  $\pm 10$  carry from May to November, leaving some growers thinking of carrying stocks over.

The UK is anticipated to produce a 13-14m tonne (t) wheat crop compared to an 11m t crop last year. Meanwhile, German and French crops are up 10% and look in good condition.

As we come out of winter, the US, Europe and the Black Sea region all have low soil moisture which could create a premium. The global wheat stocks are at a 10-year low. No two years are the same, but this time last year, the market



moved £45 per tonne in two months as funds drove prices. The big difference this year is that wheat prices are £15 per tonne higher.

Soya hulls are in short supply until the new crop (in May), and sugar beet is short due to smaller UK crops and limited imports. If the Ukrainian war ends, this could open the door to imported sugar beet.

Summer soya prices continue to trade in the early £300s ex-port. South American crops still look big with Brazil expected to produce 169m t, and despite a slight downgrade to Argentina's crop to 46.5m t, there remains a good supply of soya with the stocks the highest they have been for several years.

The focus now turns to the US. Will they plant maize or soyabean? In the meantime, the weaker dollar is helping keep US commodities low.

## ADVICE FOR FEEDING GAMEBIRDS TO REDUCE WASTE



#### The impact of gamebird nutrition on the environment is something not often considered within the game industry.

However, now more than ever, environmental issues are high on the agenda and therefore it is important we focus on key areas to limit our impacts and promote the benefits of our industry.

Recent developments in game bird nutrition can help us minimise the effect of game feeding on the environment. The County Game Feed Range is formulated to meet the specific requirements of breeding and growing birds at each stage of life. This allows us to supply sufficient nutrition for good egg production or growth and development without oversupplying nutrients and excess waste being excreted back into the environment.

The two major components of game feed diets are energy and protein levels.

However, it is not only the amount of energy and protein in the feed that is important, but the balance between them, as without energy, gamebirds are not able to utilise the protein available. Both elements of these nutrients are expensive, so as well as the environmental benefits, there are financial gains to be seen by supplying levels that game birds can utilise efficiently.

The most important protein source in game feeds is Hi-Pro Soya meal, but this comes with its own sustainability challenges relating to land use pressures. The use of synthetic amino acids such as lysine and methionine has become important in achieving the desired protein requirements for game birds.

These amino acids have very high levels of digestibility and allow feeds to be produced at lower 'crude protein' levels. These reductions limit the amount of excess nitrogen being excreted in the droppings and prevent them from leaching from soils into watercourses. The reduced crude protein also promotes health benefits by

creating a stable gut flora that is better prepared to fight disease challenges during stressful periods.

As part of the Massey Harpers County Game Feeds range, we have a tailored selection of diets to suit each type of game-rearing system. Starting with the Superfine, Starter and Coarse Crumbs, the protein levels are reduced at each stage to match requirements. The Grower and Release Pellets are formulated to promote feathering and ease the transition from pellet over to wheat.

For more information on our County Game Feed Range, please call us on 01409 254 300.

### PRE CUTTING SERVICE

#### You need to know what you are putting in the clamp to make quality, stable, well-fermented silage.

At Harpers Feeds, our in-house Near Infrared Spectroscopy (NIRS) machine can test for...

#### DRY MATTER

Aim for 20% at mowing. For best quality silage, target a dry matter of 30-32%. To achieve this, wilt for 12 hours in normal conditions for minimal field respiration losses.

#### N.D.F

Neutral detergent fibre is an indication of plant maturity. You should be aiming for 38-42%.

#### SUGARS

Minimum 10% - 15% is excellent. Sugars are the fuel of fermentation. The higher the initial level, the more efficient the fermentation. Cutting in the afternoon leads to higher sugar content.

#### **FREE NITRATES**

This is fertiliser N that has not been converted into protein. This can slow the rate of pH drop, causing poor fermentation. If free nitrates are greater than 2,500 mg/ kg cutting should be delayed. The optimum level is less than 1,000mg/kg. Under normal conditions, a plant will uptake 500 mg/ day of nitrates/ day.

With dry weather now forecast until mid April, beware of slurry contamination at harvest. As grass is growing, it is lifting the lines of slurry up with it.

Please speak to your specialist regarding pre cutting and additive use.



### THE FUTURE OF BEEF PRODUCTION

### Can you remember what the price of beef was pre Covid?

It may surprise you to know it was  $\pounds$ 3.40 per kg deadweight, so moving to now, 5 years later, to be at  $\pounds$ 6.80, is quite remarkable. During this period we have seen two contrasting influences affecting beef supply. We thought the widespread use of sexed semen in the dairy industry, was going to oversupply beef cross dairy calves, from cows not being bred to a dairy bull.

This extra supply of beef calves has been more than offset by the reduction in the beef suckler herd, with many farmers culling their cows and buying in either calves or store cattle. This has had two effects, a shortage of finished beef and a considerable rise in the demand for young cattle, leading to higher prices on the back of the highest price for beef, that we have ever seen.

There may be some ex dairy farmers who are now looking at keeping suckler cows, if they have the cubicles, silage pits and slurry system in place, it may be a good long term investment, but from keeping a bulling heifer to having a finished beast to sell is a 3 year project, so not for everyone.

To install the infrastructure needed for 100 suckler cows is a very big challenge, unless you have land suitable for out wintering. The management involved in suckler cows is seasonal, with a peak at calving time, even if you have easy calving cows there is still considerable work in managing cows and calves for the first few weeks.

It is possible to produce 1000 kgs liveweight gain per hectare from suckler cows stocked at 3 to the hectare, with each calf averaging 333 kgs weaning weight.

The alternative and most effective option is to rear beef X dairy calves, bought from the autumn block calving dairy herds calves can be sourced in good sized groups and reared on a bucket or teat system. Calves should be paddock grazed in their first and only summer, turned out weighing 200 + kgs, following our calf rearing protocols and with support from our technical specialists, the calves will be ready to graze with well developed rumens and given good genetics the potential to do 1 kg per day from grass.

If you can build a relationship with a dairy farmer you will be able to have input into the genetics used, some beef processors are paying a premium for using high pointed bulls.

With calves stocked at 7 to the hectare it is possible to achieve 1400 kgs liveweight gain per hectare, with each calf averaging 200 kgs liveweight gain over a 6 month grazing period. Cattle are then housed in October at 400 kgs + and put on to a high quality grass silage and Harpers beef Finisher nuts or Premier beef nuts + yeast, whole crop or maize can be formulated in by our expert nutritionist who will analyse and plan the diet. Cattle need to be weighed at 4 and 8 weeks after housing to ensure the target 1.4 kgs LWG is being met.

There has never been such a good time when it comes to beef price and feed cost ratio, with the current ratio being 12:1

Another option is to buy calves from an all year around dairy herd or a spring calving herd, factors to consider are, can you rear calves throughout the year? Also what is the growth potential of calves from a crossbred spring calving herd, as a general rule if there is more than 25% Jersey genetics in the rearing calf, growth and finished carcase weight will be compromised.

Many of the other breeds being used in crossbreeding ie. Fleckvieh, Norwegian Red and Montbeliarde actually produce good beef animals particularly when a very good beef bull is used.

For more details please contact your Harpers Feed specialist.



### DAIRY DISCUSSIONS GIVE PLENTY OF THOUGHT FOR RUMINATION

#### Our two recent on-farm 'ruminate' days provided farmers with some new ideas and discussion points.

The aim was to take a whole farm approach from field to feed out, focusing on the following areas:

- 🗸 Soil health
- Grass seed mixtures
- Clamp management
- Dry cow rations
- Milking cow rations.



The dry cow group is the most important group on the farm, and the management of these cows is crucial to milking cow success. Richard Waters talked about monitoring body condition score at dry off and ensuring that during this period, cows are putting on weight, not losing it.

Dry cows should be 3.0-3.25 at drying off. Cow signals were observed, and he explained how farmers can ensure adequate feed space is achieved for the number of cows in the group.

Getting cows transitioning smoothly then led us onto the milking ration, and he explained how to maximise cow performance and margins. The focus on both farms was maximising cow and farm efficiency.

Both units carried out a full mineral appraisal; this included analysing forages, concentrates and water for the cows and matching this to cow performance and breed characteristics to build the bespoke mineral pack to meet the farms' requirements.

Cows can only perform well if they are fed quality forages. This starts with using optimum grass-seed mixtures for your farm to ensure you have fast-growing but high-nutrient crops. However, getting good crop performance comes down to soil health and management.

Poor management of pH and soil indices means that nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium will not be available to be used in the amounts applied. The optimum pH for grassland is 6.2-6.5. The optimum pH range increases to 6.5-7 if clover is included in grassland.

At Harpers, we can offer on-farm pH testing with soil indices indications as well, so you can ensure that your crops get off to the best start.

Finally, once the grass reaches the clamp, consolidation is key. Ensuring that an inoculant has been applied can further improve forage nutrient availability and aid clamp stability. One key take-home message was the weight needed on the clamp to achieve sufficient compaction: clamp density should be at least 320kg/cu m of dry matter.

If you missed the Ruminate days and want to know more about the pods, please speak to your Feed Specialist, who will go through them in more detail. Thanks again to the Kirk and Keat families for hosting the two days.

### VISIT OUR MASSEY HARPERS VILLAGE AT THE ROYAL CORNWALL SHOW

At this year's Royal Cornwall Show (5-7 June), we are joining Massey Harpers Country Store to create a large 80-foot by 80-foot stand, called the Massey Harpers Village.

The feed team and refreshments can be found in the large marquee. There will be a separate marquee which will host our country store and popular clothing brands including Hexby, Ridgeline, Carhartt and more.

Guy and Elliott will have yard equipment outside to view, and 7-8 key suppliers will be on hand with all their various offers, including milk powders, grass seed, dairy chemicals, silage and harvest products, as well as fencing equipment. Please come and visit us on stand number 732 for refreshments and a natter.



### DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

We look forward to seeing you at events throughout the rest of the year.

Make sure to pop in and see us.

#### Dates

Bank Holiday Monday 5th May

**Devon County Show** Thursday 15th – Saturday 17th May

Bank Holiday Monday 26th May

**Royal Cornwall Show** Thursday 5th – Saturday 7th June

NSA South West Wednesday 25th June Weston Farm East Knownstone South Molton EX36 4ED



Harpers Feeds Waldon Way, Holsworthy Industrial Estate, Holsworthy, Devon EX22 6ER 01409 254 300 | harpers@harpersfeeds.co.uk | www.harpersfeeds.co.uk

