



CASE STUDY

Consistency key to margins in high yielding herds

Maintaining yields of 12,500 litres at 4% butterfat means attention to detail for the Irwin family and their Redhouse Holsteins herd near Benburb in Co Tyrone. But producing forage of consistently high quality can be tough in an area with almost a metre's rainfall each year – a challenge they are now addressing with the help of nutritionally improved straw.

David Irwin and his family have to run a tight ship with 170 cows on 220 acres. With much of the soil a heavy loam sitting on top of red clay, some areas are too wet and steep for cropping so end up grazed by youngstock in the summer, with the rest – bar 50 acres of spring barley – used for grass silage production.

David says approximately 120 acres of silage is taken in three cuts each year in May, July and at the end of August, and this is usually enough to supply the stock with forage all year.

“We milk three times daily and house year-round, feeding all cows and followers a TMR ration,” explains David. “This is based on grass silage with homegrown barley, then bought-in straights including double zero rapemeal, sugar beet pulp, ground maize, distillers’ grains and soya, plus added chopped wheat straw for fibre.



“We block calve the cows between October and January, mainly a lifestyle choice to get some time off in the summer, and we sell all the milk to Lakeland for manufacture into powder.

“Margins are always tight so we focus on maximising returns per cubicle. We’re not going to expand the herd further and we’re not pushing for yield – we’re just letting the fertility, feed and genetics dictate where the cows settle at.”

But consistency of forage remains a challenge in getting the best from the cows with variations in quality – not just between the three cuts of silage but within them as well – creating a number of nutritional challenges. While David had traditionally added 3kg/head chopped wheat straw to improve fibre intakes in the high yielders, 2kg in the low, he found the first cows to the feed barrier would usually sort the straw out.

“This didn’t only risk acidosis in those cows, but the ones last to the barrier ended up with too little meal and most of the straw!” says David. “So as well as the performance issue, it would create discrepancies in the records for pedigree stock sales – which is another important income stream for us as a closed pedigree herd.”



NIS
The Original Super Fibre

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In August 2016 David tried a new approach to improve the consistency of fibre in the cows' diets – replacing some of the chopped straw with nutritionally improved straw (NIS).

With the pellets made from alkaline-treated wheat straw, he wasn't sure initially how the cows would take to them. "We started low, replacing 0.1kg/head of chopped wheat straw per feed with 0.1kg NIS. Most of the cows were on a low yielder diet by that point with 2kg straw, but once we'd worked up to replacing the first kg, we had the confidence to replace the rest in one go. It was clear the cows were really happy with it and we'd already noticed a difference."

David said the biggest change within a few days was the dung became far more consistent across the herd with almost all looseness disappearing. "The cows stopped sorting the ration and a knock-on effect of this was we suddenly didn't have cows rushing to feed as soon as the wagon came along; having a consistent ration around the clock meant a far more leisurely, low stress environment in the cubicle shed. We hadn't realised the extent to which this 'stampede' was happening until it stopped."



David reports that now the cows are calving in again, intakes are up by around 5% and they're getting about two litres more per cow per day than this time last year. "There's been no change in butterfat, but levels have been maintained while the litres have risen."

In terms of raw material cost, David says it's like for like when comparing NIS against buying good wheat straw then chopping it, if you include the mess and hassle of chopping straw. The main benefit to our business is the extra milk sold per cubicle. We know effective fibre is needed in the diet – through NIS we've hit on a good way of getting it into the cow and keeping her more nutritionally stable."