



ACTISAF HELPS MAINTAIN PERFORMANCE ON SPRING GRAZING FOR HIGH-GENETIC MERIT HERD

Many dairy herds will see milk butterfat levels drop when their herd is grazing lush, spring grass – something that is often accompanied by dungs becoming loose.

But back in 2016, dairy farmer, Tim Fitzgerald, not only noticed loose dung and reduced butterfats in his herd but also observed higher levels of lameness. This meant that he was interested when a solution was suggested for the 2017 grazing season.

Tim, from Ballyroan, near Abbeyleix in Co. Laois, runs around 75 Holstein Friesian cows, with the herd being in the top three per cent in Ireland when ranked on EBI. Cows calve in the spring and Tim follows a typical rotational grazing approach, typically getting cows out to grass by day as soon as they calve in February thanks to the dry, light land he farms on, with cows out full-time by March. As the season progresses, Tim shuts up paddocks that are growing on, taking high quality silage from them, which is then used at each end of the season to feed cows.

“In 2016 the cows performed well, producing 570kg of milk solids/cow with good fertility, but we did notice more lameness and tender feet than we’d normally see in the spring, and butterfat levels were slightly depressed,” Tim explained. “I also noticed that cows were loose. I discussed this with Pat Delaney and David Lawrence from Brett Brothers, who supply my feed, and they suggested adding Actisaf live yeast to our feed.”

Tim is a firm believer in maximising output from grazing, and

measures grass growth every week. He is also committed to ensuring that his pastures deliver, reseeding around 10 per cent of the farm every year with high yielding, high sugar grass mixes for optimum performance.

“I want to get the best output I can from grazed grass, whilst also benefiting from the genetic potential of my cows,” Tim said. “As such, we feed a small amount of compound through the parlour throughout the grazing season. There is a perception among some people that it isn’t right to feed meal through the grazing season, but we certainly see a return from doing so.”

Through 2017 he fed 3kg/head/day of Brett’s feed, with Actisaf being included to support rumen function and help control acidosis.

“We really noticed the difference with the Actisaf in the feed,” Tim explained. “Milk solids were maintained throughout the spring period and dung was much firmer. Cows peaked at 32.5 litres/day at 2.5kg milk solids/day, with around 26 litres of this coming from grazed grass. We are also aiming for 600kg milk solids/cow this year.”

Tim also saw good fertility, with only 6 cows not in calf after a 69-day breeding period, with a 60 per cent conception rate to first service and 68 per cent to second service.

“Including Actisaf in the meal was certainly worthwhile last season, and I plan to continue using it in the future,” Tim concluded.

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TOP TIPS FOR TURNOUT TO GRASS

Making the most of grazed grass is critical for any profitable dairy enterprise. When weather conditions allow, farmers will already be trying to get cows out grazing by day and will get their herds out full time as soon as weather and ground conditions, as well as grass supply, allow.

James Ambrose, Technical Manager UK & Ireland for Phileo Lesaffre Animal Care provides some top tips to make the best use of spring grazing...

Gradual turnout

Turning cows out to grass creates a big change in diet, as well as imposing a stress event on the cow. It takes around three weeks for the bugs in the rumen to adapt to this, so it is important to manage the transition to grazing gradually, to avoid digestive upsets and loss of performance. Even a few hours of on/off grazing by day, when weather conditions allow, will mean that the rumen bugs can adapt to fresh grass. Cows should be able to consume 5kg DM in approximately 3 hours in suitable swards and weather conditions.

Dry matter intakes

The moisture content of grass can vary significantly in spring, and this can have a major impact on dry matter intakes. At 15% DM a cow estimated to consume 15kg of grass dry matter needs to eat 100kg of fresh grass! It is important that you don't overestimate the dry matter intake a cow can take from grazing or body condition score, performance and fertility will be compromised.

Excess crude protein

Lush, leafy spring grass can often have a crude protein content in excess of 250g/kg DM, particularly after fertiliser application, and

this is mainly rumen degradable protein (RDP). Rumen microbes are unable to utilise this much protein from high grass intakes, particularly if there is a shortage of fermentable energy available to them, and so excess RDP is broken down into ammonia in the rumen, and then absorbed into the blood stream and converted to urea in the liver. Elevated blood urea nitrogen levels (BUN) from excessive crude protein in the diet can increase body condition score loss, reduce fertility and impact on hoof health.

Buffer feeding

During the transition to grazing when grass is gradually being built up in the diet, it is important to supplement cows with forages with a high energy content and digestibility to maximise dry matter intake. Starch-based forages such as maize silage are a great combination with grass, as the use of nitrogen in the rumen is enhanced and microbial protein synthesis is increased due to the fermentable energy being supplied by the maize starch. High DMD grass silage (>28% DM) is also highly effective. This will help to maintain milk constituents and protein, in particular, as well as ensuring sufficient dry matter intake, which is critical in early lactation.

Highly digestible grass swards can challenge rumen function

Lush spring grass tends to have a high proportion of leaf to stem, resulting in low structural fibre levels in the overall diet. This lack of 'scratch factor' can impact on cudging rates and saliva production, further compromising rumen function. While the nutrient analysis of grass can vary wildly, this lack of structural fibre can be accompanied by high sugar levels – often more than 18% during sunny, dry weather. High sugar levels are great for rumen fermentation, promoting good milk proteins and strong yield,



but when supplied in excess in combination with low structural fibre they can challenge rumen function, leading to acute or sub-acute rumen acidosis (SARA). Consequently, butterfat % and milk protein % can be compromised as a result of the change in rumen fermentation, whilst prolonged challenges can impact on fertility. High levels of unsaturated fatty acids in spring grass can also cause butterfat % to be reduced, so lower butterfat doesn't always mean SARA is a problem, however.

Compound feeding

It is important that compound feed, fed through the parlour, tops up the dry matter that grass and forages do not supply in order to match the energy requirements for a given yield. It is also important that the nutrient content of the compound feed balances that of the grass to optimise rumen fermentation and maximise performance. Aim for a feed that has around 14-16% crude protein, a high digestible fibre content (such as sugar beet pulp and soya hulls), a balanced source of cereals including maize and barley and a source of bypass protein. It should also contain minerals that grass is deficient in, for example magnesium.

Monitor what the cows are telling you

Assess rumen fill 2-3 hours after milking to determine whether adequate grass has been allocated; monitor cudging rate – you are looking for more than 65% of the herd to be lying down chewing the cud 2-3 hours after milking; check dung consistency – loose, bubbly dung with undigested fibre in it is indicative of poor rumen function, as is the presence of cud balls in collecting yards or cubicles; monitor condition – cows losing excessive body condition can point to insufficient feed intake, a possible metabolic disorder, health issue or sub-optimal rumen function.

Milk quality

Monitor bulk tank milk collections for average yields and constituents. A fall in butterfat or protein of 0.3% or greater in one week is a warning sign for poor rumen function and the occurrence of SARA. It is also useful to keep an eye on the butterfat to protein ratio to ensure this falls within the optimum range of circa 1.2:1.

FEED ACTISAF LIVE YEAST

Adding Actisaf live yeast to your cows' ration will reduce setbacks in performance at turnout by helping the rumen bugs adjust to grazed grass faster and more effectively, thereby improving rumen function. Actisaf also reduces the risk of SARA, both at turnout and throughout the grazing period. Actisaf helps to stabilise rumen function and promotes milk solids and milk yield. It should be included at a recommended rate of 1kg/tonne of grazing compound, assuming a feed rate of 4-8kg compound/cow/day in early lactation.



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ACTISAF SUPPORTS RISING MILK YIELDS

Peaks Farm is located in the village of Onneley, just inside the Cheshire border and overlooking the surrounding counties of Staffordshire and Shropshire. Andrew Moss is the second generation of his family to run Peak Farm, after his Dad bought it 45 years ago, starting off with just 15 cows.

Today, the farm has transformed and is home to a high-yielding herd of 311 Holstein cows that currently average 10,100 litres/cow, with butterfat at 4.15%, protein 3.23% and a rolling cell count of 92. Milk is supplied to Muller on a Tesco aligned contract. The farm rears its own replacements, with the whole herd calving year-round. Until recently the farm was under TB restrictions, making year-round calving Andrew's only option. With limited space, block calving would be difficult to manage without being able to move youngstock off the farm.

Andrew started working with Philip Jackson from HJ Lea Oakes in Autumn 2017, and in the short time they have been working together, Andrew has seen some pleasing improvements to herd health and performance.

"We have grown cow numbers in recent years and built a new shed three years ago, and a new parlour last summer," explains Andrew. "Prior to working with Phil, yields were between 26-27 litres per cow per day, but we felt we could be doing a bit better. We feed our cows well, some may even say too well, but I believe if you want healthy cows that milk well and get back in calf quickly, you must feed well, and ultimately the feed will pay you back with these benefits."

Last October changes were made to the diet and cows were moved onto HJ Lea Oakes Summit Gold 19 Nuts, which contain Actisaf live yeast, and are fed to yield through the parlour.

The rest of the ration consists of 30kg of home-grown grass silage, 12kg of maize silage, 5.5kg of a bespoke HJ Lea Oakes blend, which

also contain Actisaf live yeast, and 1kg sugar liquid. The average feed rate of Actisaf live yeast is 6g per head per day, through both the parlour and feed barrier.

"I recommended the inclusion of Actisaf live yeast via the parlour nuts to help stabilise the rumen and ensure it could cope with the high intakes," explains HJ Lea Oakes adviser, Philip. "The change from last year's to this year's maize silage also seemed to be causing issues with cell count, so we added the Actisaf to try to stabilise everything."

"Working together with Andrew, we also made some changes to how the cows are grouped and there is now a separate transition group that are out of the main herd for two to three weeks following calving, and this change seems to be working well." Andrew also has a dry cow group and splits his high and low yielding cows.

"The addition of Actisaf worked well, and we agreed to also include it in the blend after Christmas," explains Philip. "Fertility on the farm is good, with a calving index of 398 days, and with the new diet the cows seemed to have more energy, look well, dung consistency has improved, the cows are content and Andrew is able to serve cows sooner."

"We're pleased with how the cows look and how they are performing since adding the Actisaf and making the other changes," adds Andrew. "In total since adding it to the diet, yields have risen by as much as four litres per cow to between 28-30 litres per day at 170 days in milk."

"Our next focus is turn out," says Andrew. "We'll turn the lows out in mid-April followed by the highs and we'll continue to buffer feed the highs throughout the summer. I'm confident that the inclusion of Actisaf yeast in our spring feeds will help keep butterfat under control and act as a safety net when the diet changes and rumen is pushed that bit harder."

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