

Prepare and plan

This new entrant to dairying in county Westmeath says that preparation and planning is key to avoid a repeat of spring 2018

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Peter Hamm from Dumraney, Co Westmeath, says he is keen to avoid the fodder shortages he encountered in spring 2018. "The cost of buying silage, along with reduced cow performance and overall added work, meant that spring was less than enjoyable," says this recent entrant to dairying.

Peter started dairy farming in 2013, with a low whole-farm stocking rate of 1.6 livestock units (LU)/ha. This has been increasing steadily year on year to 2.6LU/ha in 2018. He is milking 80 cows at present, with 34 newborn to one-year-olds and 31 one-to two-year-olds.

For 2017, cows were out to grass by day on 2 February, day and night by 17 March and finished the first round on 10 April.

"Spring 2018 proved to be quite different with cows only out to grass day and night from 20 April with the first round finished by 25 April," says Peter. "This, coupled with increasing cows/replacements numbers in 2017 meant that feed had to be purchased. In the end, we had to buy 25t of wheat and barley mix, plus 170 bales."

Planning for 2018/2019

Firstly, the fodder requirement must be estimated. Be realistic about the number of months for which silage will be required. Secondly, there is absolutely no room for unproductive stock when you have a potential silage deficit.

Culling rate and replacement rate



Peter Hamm and Teagasc advisor John Hardy inspect a field which is being reseeded.

must also be established. Peter's herd is relatively young, has excellent genetics and management, which means that the culling rate is low. ICBF 2017 co-op shows that 520kg solids/cow was produced in 2017, from 850kg concentrates. This indicates that there were very few unproductive milking cows on the farm.

"I will cull empty cows (estimate six) and empty replacements (three) before housing," says Peter. He reckons that culling these nine cows in November will save 80t of silage.

For this farm, does the 5.5-month winter include a reserve? The land is considered dry and if a spring like 2014, 2015, 2016, or 2017 occurs, cows will be at grass in February and out full-time by 17 March and then the 5.5 months will include a reserve.

If a spring like 2013 and 2018 occurs, however, then there still will be silage available until mid-April – that's with no grass grazed at all in early spring. If spring 2019 allows for normal grazing to occur, then there will be a surplus of 100t to 200t.



Long-term silage plans

Peter plans to be milking 120 cows by 2020. With a 20% replacement rate, this will leave the whole farm stocking rate at 2.4LU/ha. "To be 100% self-sufficient for grass and silage, the whole farm will need to grow 15t/DM/ha and utilise 12.5t/DM/ha," he says. All land is dry and results from PastureBase show that 15t/DM/ha has been grown on his owned land over the past three years.

Additional land

"When all additional land is reseeded and on target for lime, N, P and K 15t/ha should be achievable for this dry farm. However, this will take some time to achieve, especially across the additional land. We'll have to manage the whole farm well and be very disciplined with our whole farm fertiliser/lime plan or we could run into trouble."

Thinking back to his days as a jockey, Peter concludes: "A fall might not be your own fault but you certainly remember it and try not to repeat the experience!"

This reserve can be rolled on into the next year's requirements. Depending on the tonnes left over, this farm can then assess tonnes to be harvested for 2019/2020. One of the lessons learnt from 2013/2018 is that it is far better to have this reserve on hand than to be searching for fodder and paying double the price in March/April.

Where will 2018/2019 silage come from?

Peter has 20 acres of an out-block on a

long-term lease that will be cut twice and 27 acres of a two-cut silage crop secured.

This should provide 800t. To date, there has been 30 surplus bales taken from the milking block. As the farm has been growing 15t/DM/ha on average, we estimate that at least 100 bales will be made this year.

Peter has taken on additional land this year on the milking block. This land is currently being reseeded in two stages.

Due to this, it is slightly harder to

estimate the number of surplus bales, so being conservative is very important. There are 20 purchased bales left over from last year. This brings the total feed that should be available to 900t.

This leaves the farm short of 100t. A good option, if available, could be to buy 12 acres of a standing crop. If this option is not available, then buying beet pulp or hulls is another possibility. If availing of the second option use the pulp/hull in November/December/January to feed the dry cows.

Reducing silage intake

Feeding 3kg pulp/hulls and reducing silage intake by 3kg over 90 days across the 80 cows will save 100t fresh-weight (fw) of silage. For example, dry cow silage intake will be 10kg/dm/day (45kg fw).

Feeding 7kg (32kg/fw) silage plus 3kg pulp/hulls. The silage must be restricted to 7kg/dm (32 kg fw) and feed space must be available for this option to work.

Table 1:

Animal type	A No. of stock kept over the winter	B No. of months (include one-to two-month reserve for difficult weather)	C pit silage needed/animal per month	Total tonnes of silage needed (AxBxC)
Dairy cows	74	5.5	1.6	652
0-1 year old	34	5.5	0.7	131
1-2 year old	31	5.5	1.3	221
				1,004

Martina Gormley and Peter Hamm.

