

Should we be Budgeting for a 6 Month Winter?
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“Spring is nature’s way of saying, ‘let’s party!’” was a quote from the late American comedian and actor Robin Williams, But for many farmers across the country the only party they were part of this spring was a ‘search party’ for bales and fodder.

With many farmers having cattle housed from mid October to mid April the question must be asked ‘Should we be budgeting for a 6 month winter?’. Putting this Spring behind us we must now look forward to the future and see how we can prevent fodder shortages from happening again. There are a number of different ways in which we can firstly reduce our silage demand such as killing heifers/cattle at 20 months before the second winter, scanning cows and heifers and selling/finishing any empties or passengers in the herd, growing winter forage crops such as Rape and Kale or by feeding more meal to younger stock.

We can only budget our silage demand when we know exactly what stock we plan on keeping for the winter. Farmers must know now what they plan on keeping over the winter in order to decide how much silage they actually need. Below is an approximate silage calculator which will help to decide on how many bales that will need to be made over the coming months in order to fulfill our Winter silage demand.

Animal Type	Number (a)	Months (b)	Silage (c)	Bales (d)	Total = a x b X c or d
Suckler Cow			1.4	1.6	
Yearling/store			1.3	1.4	
Weanling			0.7	0.8	
Total					

Calculating Supply:

Calculate t of pit silage available or number of bales. If dealing with a number of fodder sources convert to silage at 20% DM. Typical values include maize silage at 30% DM, whole crop at 40% DM and fodder beet at 19% DM.

For example taking a 20 cow suckler herd where weanlings are kept for the first winter using the calculator above we will see roughly what the silage requirement will be, assuming a 6 month winter for 20 suckler cows and 20 weanlings the demand will be as follows

1. 20 Suckler cows by 6 months by 1.6 bales/month = 192 bales
2. 20 Weanlings by 6 months by 0.8 bales/month = 96 bales

Total = 288 bales

In terms of these cattle numbers, it is interesting to note that if we reduce this 6 month winter to a 4 month winter we can see a reduction from a demand of 288 bales to approximately 192 bales, a reduction of approximately 96 bales, which highlights the importance of a silage reserve.

Although many farmers need to build reserves after this tough Spring, we must not take our eye off the ball, with rumours of farmers aiming to cut high density swards in ‘another few weeks’ we cannot overcompensate quantity over quality. Previous work from Teagasc has shown the significant drop in silage quality where harvest date is delayed past the end of May. Below see the effect of harvest date on DMD%.

Table1. Grass¹ yield and digestibility

Harvest date	1 May	8 May	15 May	22 May	29 May	5 June	12 June	19 June	26 June	3 July
Yield (t DM/ha)	2.92	3.99	4.98	5.96	6.79	7.82	8.48	8.93	9.50	9.83
DMD%	79.9	77.9	77.5	76.6	74.6	69.2	67.9	64.3	63.5	58.2

¹Silage yields and digestibilities (DMD) will be lower than these values

Instead of going for a big 1st cut in late June it would be a lot more beneficial in terms of quality and quantity for a farmer to take two cuts thereby cutting the end of May and going with fertiliser/slurry straight after and harvesting another crop Mid July thereby increasing the number and quality of bales/pit silage. Prioritising quantity over quality will lead to poorer quality silage and may lead to silage not suitable for growing cattle or autumn calving cows; this will inevitably lead to more concentrates being fed to supplement the poorer quality silage thus increasing the cost of keeping animals through the winter. When going for a second cut it is important that only 80% of the Nitrogen that was applied for first cut is applied for second cut i.e. 80 units/acre versus 100 units, as a rough guide for index 3 soils 80 units of N, 8 units of P and 28 of K should be spread after first cut. 2500gallons of dilute cattle slurry (3.5%DM 5-3-15units/1000gallons) and 2.5-3 bags of CAN would suffice.

With excellent grass growing conditions in the last few days there may be excess grass on some paddocks in the coming week or so, Newford Farm in Athenry recorded daily growth rates of 67kgDM/Ha earlier this week, farmers may have an opportunity to take out paddocks for surplus bales which would be an excellent quality feed for growing cattle for the winter thus helping to reduce the amount of silage required in the main crop.