

The value of a fodder reserve

As well as peace of mind, a fodder reserve can potentially save you money

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Given the ongoing unpredictability of the weather, it stands to reason that all farmers with grazing livestock should plan to have a fodder reserve.

Due to the cascade of weather events over the past 15 months – the wet autumn in 2017, the poor conditions in spring and the prolonged summer drought – fodder supplies were stretched or completely exhausted on many farms.

Fortunately, the mild autumn allowed for additional fodder crops to be grown and grazed or preserved. This, in addition to the extra grass growth over the autumn and winter months, helped address the immediate fodder supply issues.

However, a survey carried out by Teagasc in January 2019 found that up to 25% of farms, one in four, are still reporting a fodder deficit (Fig 1).

Building a fodder reserve

When planning to establish a fodder reserve, farmers have a number of options.

The first is to harvest extra silage off the existing land base. This can be achieved through improved grassland management, including effective use of fertiliser and manure.

Closing up extra ground for first-cut is a way to allow a greater proportion of the farm's requirement for silage to be harvested early.

This means later cuts can go towards a fodder reserve. A stocking rate of four livestock units per hectare or a demand of 70kg DM/ha should be manageable on the grazing



Farmers should plan to harvest extra silage to create a reserve.



Ensure silage bales are wilted to 30% DM and well wrapped.

area during May and early June at peak growth.

A second option is to harvest silage from rented land; however, this will depend on land availability and its suitability for silage production.

Another possibility is to approach a neighbouring farmer with spare capacity and come to an arrangement to cut silage on their land. Wholecrop cereals or fodder crops are also worth considering if they are available at a competitive price.

Whichever option you choose it is important that you have a plan to develop a fodder reserve on the farm over the next 12 to 24 months.

Silage: safe storage

When stockpiling fodder on the farm, it should be stored in an area that is not in contact with, or obstructing, machinery or livestock.

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Where silage bales are chosen as the best option for a long-term fodder reserve, take care to ensure that the bales are wilted to 30% DM and well wrapped.

Extra layers of plastic can help prevent storage losses and ensure good silage quality at feed out. On larger farms, having a standalone silage pit

can be useful to keep costs down and to reduce labour at feed-out, although some of the flexibility of silage bales is lost.

On many farms, the availability of a silage slab and facilities to collect effluent will determine whether bales or pit silage form the feed reserve.

How much fodder reserve is required?

All livestock farms regardless of their location, soil type, stocking rate, enterprise, need a fodder reserve.

Depending on fodder demand, and risk of a shortage due to inclement weather, aim to have at least an additional 400kg DM per livestock unit. This equates to roughly two silage bales per livestock unit. For example, on a dairy farm a fodder reserve for 100 cows would consist of at least of at least 200 bales.

When costed at €30/bale this equates to €6,000 of silage in a fodder reserve. Initial Teagasc Profit Monitor figures report that on dairy farms in 2018, concentrate input per cow increased by 400 kg per cow, on average.

When costed at €250/tonne, this corresponds to €10,000 of extra spending on concentrate to make up for the lack of forage in the diet per 100 cows.

In essence, the approach to having a fodder reserve in the yard should be seen as insurance against weather conditions and unforeseen events.

To this end, the fodder shortages in 2018 have highlighted the importance of grazed grass to livestock production systems and also the importance of a fodder reserve to avoid stress for both farmer and livestock.

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Figure 1

Proportion of farms reporting a fodder deficit in January 2019

