

# A country of two halves

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The summer of 2016 will be remembered by farmers in the West and Northwest as being mild but one of persistent rain. The facts confirm farmers' perceptions. Although soil temperatures have been typical for the time of year September recorded 28 wet days with 95.5ml of rainfall compared to 13 wet days in September 2015 with a total of 26.2ml of rainfall.

The persistency of the rain in these areas was in stark contrast to areas in the south and east of the country where drought was more the issue. The continuous rainfall prevented ground from drying out and led to delays in silage cutting. Stock were unsettled; damaged ground and had to be housed in August or September. It was frustrating to house stock while grass was blowing in the wind but could not be utilised.

The consequence of all this is that there are farms in these areas that have been feeding stock inside for the last 4-6 weeks. Silage stocks will be depleted going into the winter and some silages will have low dry matter and low digestibility.

## What can be done?

It is not that long ago since we faced into feed shortages in 2013 but fundamentally the problem then was in the spring when a lot of the forage was already eaten. Now most farms will have a good level of forage available and with a bit of planning will have more options. We basically need to look to what needs to be done immediately and what planning is needed to get through the winter.

### Current grass covers

With good grass growth in September and October and reduced stocking rates, with a proportion of stock housed, grass covers were good on farms. These covers should still be grazed off to 4cm in rotation to have the farm set up for grass next spring. Don't leave heavy covers on fields going into the winter.

Individuals have weaned calves a

few weeks earlier than normal and turned the weanlings or yearling cattle back out to graze the grass in a bid to minimise any ground damage. Others have used ewes or lambs to achieve the same goal.

### Weaning cows

With earlier housing of suckler cows and calves there has been an opportunity to get calves eating concentrate and so calves can be weaned. This has reduced the demand on the cows and will prevent them losing condition going into the winter. Their silage intake after weaning will drop to about 1.2% of bodyweight (a 650kg cow will consume 7.8kg DM or 39kg freshweight). This will in effect help conserve silage stocks.

Cows that have been weaned and identified for culling can be given silage plus 6-7kg of a finishing concentrate for 6-8 weeks. The target is to have them finished before the end of 2016 or early 2017. This will help to reduce silage demand because your average suckler cow would consume 1.4t of fresh silage/month.

### Get your silage tested

The delay in cutting and the poor drying conditions will impact on the quality of silage. By testing silage now you will get a handle on what you are actually feeding. You can supplement accordingly whether you are trying to spin-out supplies or maintain animal performance.

### Planning:

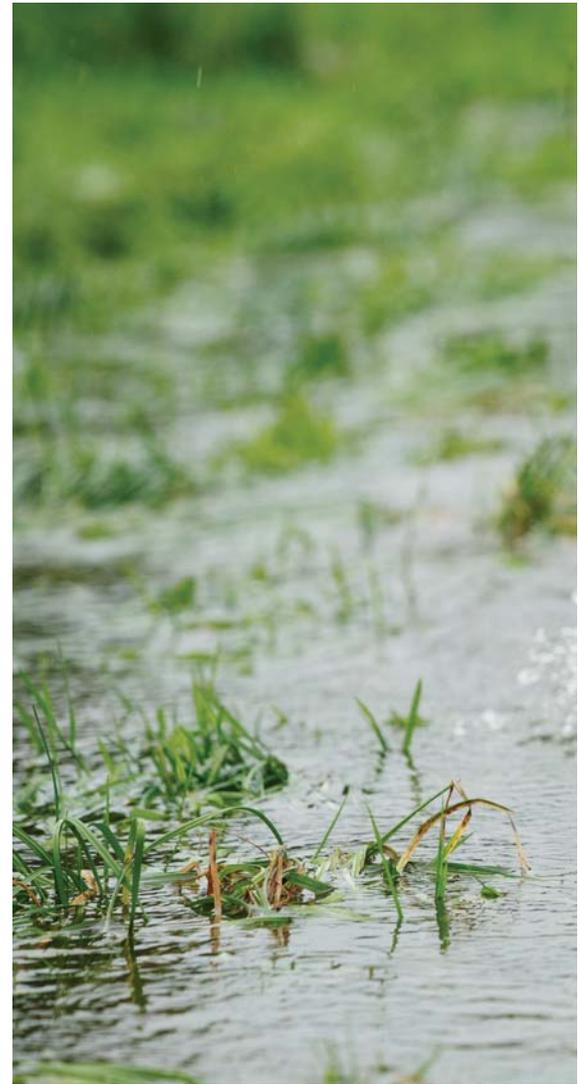
Steps Needed to Deal with a Potential deficit in Winter Feed:

#### 1. Calculate the feed available on the farm

Count the number of round bales of silage on the farm. Typically a 20%DM 4 x 4 roundbale of silage will contain about 880 kg of fresh silage.

Measure any pits of silage (length x breadth x average settled height) to get m<sup>3</sup>. Multiply this figure by .77 to get the volume of typical 20%DM silage. So a farmer with a pit 20m x 10m x 3m= 600m<sup>3</sup> (600m<sup>3</sup> x 0.77 = 462t fresh silage). If silage is wetter at 18%DM then you need to multiply by 0.81 or multiply by 0.68 if it is drier 25%DM silage.

Other bales of fodder such as hay or



straw should also be counted to give an overall assessment of feed on the farm.

#### 2. Calculate your winter feed requirement

What stock numbers do you intend to carry over the winter? The number of animals in each category to be retained over the winter should be calculated and you need to make a judgement on what you expect as your length of winter.

The table below will help with your calculations.

Animal Type	Pit silage(t) needed per month	Bales needed per month
Suckler Cow	1.4	1.6
In Calf Heifer	1.3	1.4
Weanling	0.7	0.8
Store Cattle	1.3	1.4

So a farmer with a five-month winter carrying 40 suckler cows, 30 weanlings, 8 in calf heifers and 20



store cattle will need 567t of pit silage or 645 round bales.

### 3. Calculate if you have a surplus or deficit

We know from Step 1 that the farmer has 462t of fresh silage available but with current stock numbers his likely demand is 567t a potential deficit of 105t of fresh silage or almost 120 round bales. Although potentially short of silage the farmer still has over 80% of his forage requirement on hand.

### 4. What options to consider

**Buy Extra Forage:** Any farmer with over 50% of his forage requirement on hand could get away without buying extra forage. The key questions to consider if you go down the route of buying extra forage are: Do you have any idea of the quality? And secondly: Is it value for money?

Unless you know the source of the silage then the risk is that the dry matter could well be low due to the wet year and quality will be below average because of the delay in cutting.

**Buy Concentrates:** This option may well be the most viable for farmers

who have a small deficit to make up. It would be favoured for several reasons. Most concentrates are competitively priced and represent good value where good ingredients are used.

This leaves the risk of variability much lower than when buying in silage.

Feeding a given amount of concentrate can help reduce silage demand. Most rations will be well balanced for vitamins and minerals.

Our theoretical farmer mentioned earlier could restrict the silage intake of suckler cows to 30kg/day and offer 1kg of concentrate/day for the next four months reducing the demand for silage by almost 77t or  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the deficit.

If the forage intake of the cows were to be reduced below this there would have to be a corresponding increase in concentrates given. For example, if silage was limited to 20kg/day concentrates would have to increase to between 2.5-3kg/day.

If you plan to ration out silage using concentrates speak to your advisors and work out a specific plan for your farm and what stock groups to target.

What is good value in concentrates?

On the energy component of the ration, home grown cereals and maize offer the best value.

Protein sources offering the best value this year include distiller's maize, rapeseed meal, soya and native beans if available.

If you want to include a good source of digestible fibre soya hulls are again good value this year. But always compare prices at time of buying.

### Reduce stock numbers

In our example if the farmer was to offload the 20 store cattle now he would save 130t of silage which would solve the deficit problem. But often it is not as clear cut as this.

It would certainly ease cashflow but it will reduce your stocking rate for next year.

Before you plan to sell extra stock, check with your accountant if there is any tax implication.

The key message is that if you feel you may be short on fodder this winter do a feed budget now and you will leave yourself with more options.

For many of you buying extra ration will be the most effective way of stretching forage supplies.



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## Trying to build suckler cow numbers while ensuring there is enough winter feed

Martin Donaghy lives and farms part-time outside the village of Burnfoot, Co Donegal. His is a dry farm, but some fields are on sloping ground and after high rainfall they can be easily cut up.

Martin is a young farmer and is building up his suckler herd. At present he has 10 suckler cows and has plans to build his numbers to 20 over the next 3-5 years. Martin stated that he wants to build his cow number off a good base of maternal genetics. The typical cow in this herd at the moment has mainly Simmental and Limousin cross breeding. The herd is sired by AI and a teaser bull is used to help detection.

The main AI bulls used in 2014 and 2015 were Limousin (OZS) and Simmental (S1624). These bulls are bulls with high reliability for both replacement and terminal, and have high Euro values for both.

### Knowledge sources

Martin is participating in the BDGP scheme and is also a member of a local young farmer discussion group. With the recent August evaluations of herds under BDGP, the herd showed up very positively.

The reference number of animals that calved in 2014 was 12, currently Martin has 15 females in the herd that are 4 or 5 star on the replacement index. Martin is extremely happy with the scheme and states that it's another tool to use to help aid key decisions.

Participating in a discussion group is another source of on-farm practi-



cal information. The group is a young farmer group formed for the purpose of getting like minded farmers together to discuss and view new ideas.

### Stock performance

Young stock on the farm this summer didn't thrive as well as other years, however over the last six weeks Martin noticed that stock started to thrive well again. The lower thrive was predominantly down to high rainfall and very low dry matter in the grass. With less sun the energy content in the grass will also be lower. See below a table of weaning performance over 2016.

### Current winter feed

This winter Martin plans to house 10 cows, one teaser bull, five maiden heifers and two weaning heifers. At the moment Martin has eight weaning bulls that he plans to sell at Milford mart .

Martin has 158 bales of silage made. The bales are good quality and half of them were saved in the third weekend in July. "The weather was excellent that weekend with four good dry days but ideally the silage would have been cut 18 days earlier," says Martin.

See Table 3 for this year's winter feed budget plan.

Using the winter feed budget, Martin requires 155 tonne of silage. Converting this into bales (using a bale weight of 800kg ) , Martin needs 194 bales, a short fall of 36.

### Actions required

1. Straw into the diet now.
2. Substitute some concentrates into the diet.
3. Sell off under performing stock.
4. Buy extra bales / pit silage.

**Tommy Doherty**  
Drystock advisor, Ballybofey

**Table 1:** Main AI bulls used in 2014 and 2015

	Replacement	Reliability	Terminal	Reliability
Limousin-OZS	€96	91%	€111	97%
Simmental- S1624	€202	71%	€122	87%

**Table 2:** Performance of young stock 2016

Tag	Last weight date	Weight (kg)	ADG (kg since birth)	Breed code	Date of birth
194	19/10/2016	485	1.22	LMX	23/10/2015
195	19/10/2016	430	1.06	LMX	23/10/2015
196	19/10/2016	495	1.27	LMX	30/10/2015
197	19/10/2016	480	1.21	LMX	25/10/2015
200	19/10/2016	415	1.25	SIX	29/12/2015
203	19/10/2016	310	1.08	LMX	16/02/2016
204	19/10/2016	250	0.94	LMX	16/03/2016

**Table 3:** 2016 winter feed budget plan

	Stock numbers	No. of months	Tonnes / month	Total tonnes
Suckler cows	10	7	1.4	98
Teaser Bull	1	7	1.4	9.8
Maiden Heifers	5	7	1.1	38.5
Weaning Heifers	2	6	.7	8.4
Total Tonnes Required				154.7