

Managing silage bales: knowing what you have

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Making silage is not as cut and dry as it used to be (excuse the pun!). There was a time when you just had a first cut and a second cut. Now, most farmers will make pit silage but there are also a number of different cuts with paddocks being taken out of the grazing rotation throughout the year and some silage fields being earmarked for ultra-high quality early bales.

It can become difficult to keep track of where the good bales are kept, and where the excellent bales are. One solution is to keep the different quality bales in different piles around the yard. But most yards are tight for space and farmers don't want the bales too far from the sheds.

As a result, bales tend to get piled on top of one another as near to the feed space as possible. So how do you distinguish between the good, the bad and the ugly when looking at a block of maybe 500 bales?

Remembering what's what

I know farmers who use different colour silage wraps to great effect. The best quality bales might be wrapped purple; if not making pit silage first-cut bales might be wrapped in pink and second cut in black, for example. This is a very simple and effective technique.

Tom Ryan who farms in partnership with his wife Mary and son Michael, next to the famous Lisheen Castle near Thurles, has an even more precise technique. To keep track of which bales go where, Tom writes the cut date and which field the bales came from on the front of the bales, where it is clearly visible.

"It can be hard to remember where each section of bales came from," says Tom. "You are taking out pad-

docks all year. Writing the date and field name on the bale allows me to keep track of what I'm feeding."

The bale furthest to the right of the pile has the field name and date, while the rest of the bales that came off that field have just the date on them. Tom has bales from the "high field" cut on 18 June, because Tom knows the size of the field and there was a cut of seven bales to the acre.

By having the date on the bales, Tom is able to ensure that any spare bales from last year get used first. How many farmers are guilty of having the spare bales in the back of the pile unused for the last number of years?

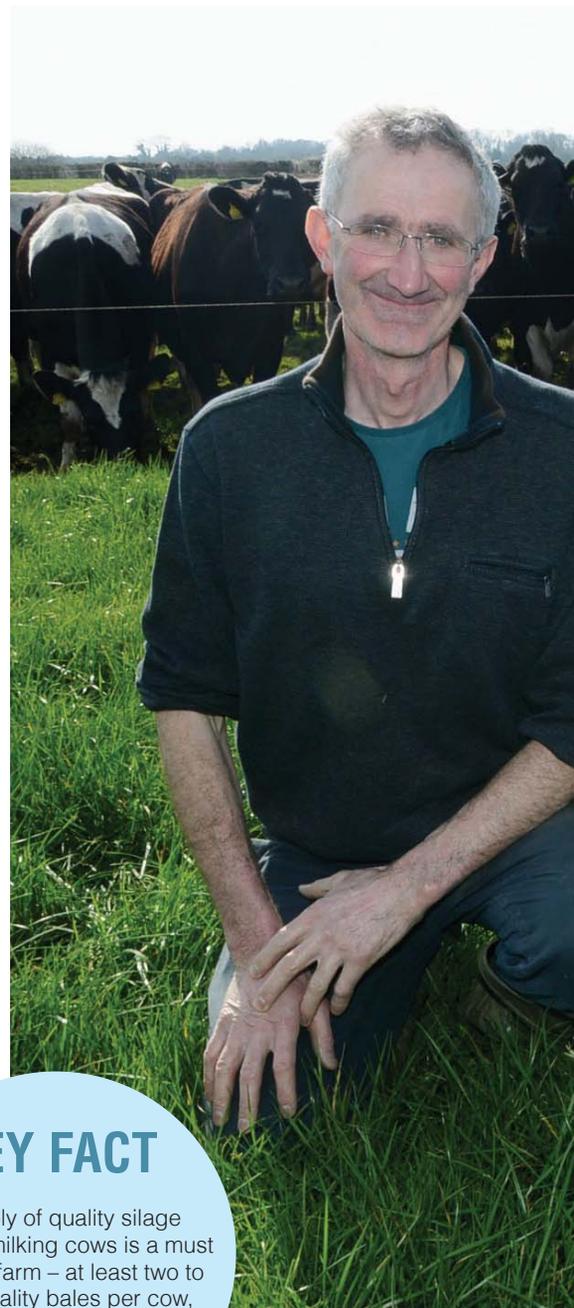
A supermarket wouldn't leave their products closest to going out of date at the back of the shelf; they put them to the front so that they are used first and it should be the same with bales of silage. If possible, a pile of bales should be accessible from all sides to help prevent this from occurring.

Planning for quality

In order to have good quality bales you need to make a plan. Most farms will be capable of making a number of good quality bales during the year



Tom Ryan has bales from the "high field" cut on 18 June.



KEY FACT

A supply of quality silage bales for milking cows is a must on every farm – at least two to three quality bales per cow, depending on your stocking rate, soil type etc.

from paddocks that have been taken out of the grazing rotation. These bales cut during the grazing season are ideal when fed to late lactation cows at the back end of the year.

During the winter, dry cows don't need the same quality silage but you still want to ensure that weanling heifers get good quality silage.

In order to get those additional quality silage bales, you need to make a plan. These bales will have to come from silage fields earmarked for quality. They will need less nitrogen (roughly 50 units/acre), and be cut early. A simple plan proposed by Teagasc dairy specialist Joe Patton is to: graze the paddock in February if possible, and spread with 3,000 gallons of slurry, then in March top up with



Tom Ryan and
Lorcan Dooley.

either 2.5 bags of 18-6-12 or one bag of urea if soil fertility is very good.

Cut around now, in mid-May. Ideally, you should choose a field with good quality ryegrass and if possible store these bales in a separate pile. They should not be stacked as they can lose their shape which can cause spoilage. Remember, if putting bales on hard core ensure that the surface is as smooth as possible to prevent punctures.

You need to be resigned to the fact that you will be getting less than eight bales to the acre on these fields. Forget about getting bulk, it's quality not quantity you are after.

An added bonus of writing down the field name and date is that Tom knows how many bales came from a paddock. If he got six bales to the acre, he can be reasonably confident

that they are good quality bales.

Benefits

Farmers that have started to make these quality bales are delighted with them. For the spring-milking herd, you need excellent quality silage. Tom says: "Having good bales in the spring gives you more confidence to graze strong. It's an insurance policy – if the weather goes wrong it's not the end of the world having to feed silage once its good quality."

There is no disputing that quality bales require more planning but for a resilient dairy farm there needs to be a supply of excellent quality silage in the spring and autumn. Cows will calve and milk in spring that's a certainty. The Irish weather is not so certain therefore farmers must be prepared for all eventualities.

Why do you need quality silage?

The reason you need a stock of good quality bales is to buffer feed cows at the shoulders of the year. You want to extend the grazing during the autumn and to work with your grazing plan in the spring. This spring showed the importance of having good silage to feed to cows forced indoors during poor weather/soil conditions.

The major benefit of having quality silage, especially during the spring, is that you don't get that big crash in milk solids and yield if cows need to be housed temporarily. It also reduces meal feeding, improves fertility and helps maintain cow condition.