

Extra pit proved prudent

Tommy Doherty
Dairy advisor, Teagasc Donegal

Donegal farmer Lawrence McNamee added a fourth silage pit after a tough winter in 2013

"My light bulb moment came when I was looking back at a number of old aerial photographs of our farm commissioned by my predecessors," says Donegal dairy farmer Lawrence McNamee reflecting on the last major fodder shortage in 2013.

"Overhead photographs were normally taken around mid-May and there it was, consistently, half a pit of silage still in reserve. By contrast, on St Patrick's Day 2013 we had hit the back wall of our third silage pit.

"Prior to 2013, we had been pushing the stock numbers and pushing the boundaries. This had gone beyond my comfort zone, something had to change. That spring I made a promise to myself that sailing this close to the wind was not for me. We decided to build a fourth silage pit and secured another parcel of land dedicated to silage production."

Needless to say, the extra pit has alleviated a lot of pressure in Lawrence's yard. With four separate pits, Lawrence is able to rotate his feeding so that the reserve is not getting older every year. Taking on the extra silage ground and building a reserve in the pit means there is a backup plan for extreme weather conditions.

"Lawrence assessed his situation in 2013; he hit the back wall of the pit

and had to resort to feeding whatever was available at the asking price. The steps of building a fourth pit and taking on surplus silage ground were sound decisions," says Tommy Doherty, Lawrence's Teagasc advisor. "After the longest winter in my memory we still had 50t of silage left over," says Lawrence, with relief rather than any sense of satisfaction in his tone.

"Winter 2017/18 highlighted more than ever the importance of feed budgeting and sufficient silage production on farms, particularly those of us battling the elements in the northwest and along the western seaboard. Milking cows in Donegal on heavy and sometimes very variable soils with high rainfall, is a long way and a lot different from some of the highly favoured parts of Munster. The importance of having a good silage

GRANT AID

There may be opportunities for farmers to gain grant aid for new silage pits under TAMS II. "If farmers contact their local advisor in the next couple of months, they may be able to plan a project and submit an application to add a pit in time for next year's silage season," says Tommy Doherty.

"For many farmers things may look dark at the moment but things will improve and adding some silage capacity, particularly if you can get it grant-aided might be a prudent step."



Tommy Doherty and Lawrence McNamee in front of the four individual silage pits on the farm.

reserve cannot be underestimated."

Though quotas were still in place in 2013, farmers in Donegal were able to get hold of quota at an affordable price. Lawrence reflects with hindsight that he may have been expanding too fast.

"We were heavily stocked which meant we weren't able to do things we wanted to do, such as reseeding paddocks. It was a vicious circle, we needed more grass dry matter but couldn't spare a paddock for a couple of months to establish a new, more productive, sward.

"Of course we were only making as much silage as we needed. We had none spare."

Since 2013, when he reduced stock numbers Lawrence has been systematically building up the productive capacity of the farm, not only by reseeding (he now reseeds at least 10% each year), but also by investing in infrastructure such as roads and drainage. Needless to say, he has steadily enhanced his herd genetics. He plans vigorously for winter feed.

A feed budget is essential on the farm even if you have some reserve capacity. It is paramount to know what winter feed is required on the farm in order to maintain stock comfortably, build a reserve or assess a surplus/deficit. It is also essential to know the growth potential of the

farm. Assess grass growth by grass measuring and have the ability to identify surplus paddocks which can contribute to building reserves.

Passenger animals on the farm must be identified. Winter fodder is precious and it is essential that it is fed to our most important groups of stock. Non-productive stock, particularly cull cows, should be offloaded as they are adding to the feeding requirements unnecessarily. Where farms are running into great deficit, perhaps contracting rearing heifers off the farm could be an option to free up fodder for the milking cows.

With all these options considered, Lawrence credits a lot of the knowledge to past generations, and feels there is a lot to be learned from the years gone by.

"The previous generation weren't always wrong," Lawrence says. "We need to produce and graze as much grass as we can but in recent years we've learned that it's prudent to have a decent reserve of silage. Those who are struggling to get through at the moment may feel there is no light at the end of the tunnel but they will get through. I'd certainly advise anyone to think about building a reserve once they have the chance to do so. You really only have to do it once and it certainly reduces stress when you have a long winter!"



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