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 2012; 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 50% of silage left over,” says Lawrence, with relief rather than any sense of satisfaction in his tone.

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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.

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Since 2013, when he reduced stock numbers Lawrence has been systemically 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.

“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!”