

The Dairy Group

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Forage outlook 2025/26

Richard Lane, Dairy Business Management Consultant

Spring 2025 could not have been more different than 2024 and for some, forage stocks have come under increasing pressure. We are seeing a wide range in 1st cut silage yield depending on cutting date and location ranging from as low as 1.9tDM/ha to 4.8tDM/ha.

Dairy cows require a balanced diet rich in fibre, protein, and energy to support milk production and overall health. Regularly tracking forage stocks allows you to maintain a steady ration, ensuring that cows receive consistent nutrition and avoid sudden shortages or variations in forage quality that can lead to digestive issues, reduced milk yield, and even fertility problems. Our approach is to regularly assess forage stocks and to take samples as each crop is harvested and to enter the data on to our web based MCi management system.

The next step is to set up a forage plan in MCi for the next 12 months including target livestock forage requirements and the planned forage harvests of grass, maize and wholecrop. The report below is part of a plan for the year ahead, which identifies a potential shortfall of maize in August & September:



Forage Plan - Forage plan to Mar26 The Dairy Group - MCi Demo

	Yield (tDM/ha)	Opening	Apr 25	May 25	Jun 25	Jul 25	Aug 25	Sep 25	Oct 25
Grass Silage									
1st cut	4.0			40.0					
2nd cut	3.0				40.0				
3rd cut	2.5					20.0			
Production (t DM)			0	160	120	50	0	0	0
Requirement (t DM)			29	15	11	7	13	20	27
Planned Stocks (t DM)		100	71	216	325	368	355	335	308
Actual/Forecasted Stocks (t DM)			71	165	274	317	303	283	257
Maize Silage									
Maize	10.0							40.0	
Maize contract	10.0								20.0
Production (t DM)			0	0	0	0	0	400	200
Requirement (t DM)			59	32	29	28	41	49	57
Planned Stocks (t DM)		200	141	109	80	51	10	361	504
Actual/Forecasted Stocks (t DM)			141	60	31	3	-39	313	455
All Forage Totals									
Total Production (t DM)			0	160	120	50	0	400	200
Total Requirement (t DM)			88	46	40	35	55	69	84
Total Planned Stocks (t DM)			212	325	405	419	365	696	812
Total Actual/Forecast Stocks (t DM)			212	225	304	319	265	596	712

EDITORIAL

Welcome to our June newsletter. This month we navigate the challenges of planning and monitoring forage stocks to ensure a balanced diet can be consistently maintained.

The 2nd article covers the FETF grant scheme and some of the opportunities it offers to increase the level of automation and technology on your farm. FETF is now open for applications and closes on 10 July 2025.

Genomic testing dairy heifers and making better use of the data provided is the focus of the 3rd article. In collaboration with NMR, we can now provide our clients with direct access to genomic testing backed up by independent breeding advice.

In brief articles cover a variety of topics including Thermogenic counts, communication and your chance to influence Government policy through the Defra Farming profitability review,.

If you would like to discuss any of the topics featured here, please speak to your consultant or ring the office on 01823 444488.

Christine Pedersen

In this example it may be possible to fill this gap by taking your own cereals or buying a standing cereal crop to make wholecrop, or adjusting the ratio of grass/maize silage fed to the cows. The benefit of forage planning is to identify at an early stage how plans may need to change according to actual and potential forage yields. Once the plan is set up in MCI, it is easy to assess the silage stocks after each harvest, which is then used to update the forecasted stocks and to identify the need to adjust harvesting or feeding plans. The MCI plan is very flexible and can incorporate other livestock to be included in the plan, like dairy heifers and beef cattle. The silage assessment also calculates the dry matter yield for each harvest which is important to future planning and to identify crop performance.

Anecdotally some producers have commented that silage was drier than they had expected when picked up but initial 1st cut silage analyses indicate a typical range in dry matter results. Regular sampling of your own forages will be essential to ensure that balanced diets are formulated. Planning and monitoring forage stocks is not just about ensuring enough feed for dairy cows—it's a crucial component of farm efficiency, financial stability, and sustainability. For more information speak to your consultant or contact the office.

Richard provides nutrition, herd monitoring & business management advice, driving efficiency, reducing waste and improving animal welfare & environmental sustainability. Contact Richard on 07717 502505



FETF - Opportunities for automation

David Darlington, Dairy Business Consultant

Staff recruitment and retention is an ongoing issue for dairy businesses with many seeking to automate processes to allow workers to focus on skilled, rather than mundane tasks. Introducing technology has frequently led to improvements in technical performance and profitability too.

Through the latest round of the Farming Equipment & Technology Fund (FETF), eligible farmers can apply for grants to help invest in equipment and technology through three funding themes:

- **Productivity** (66 items available)
- **Slurry management** (17 items available)
- **Animal health & welfare** (AHW) (over 100 items available for pigs, sheep, chicken, beef & dairy)

Applicants can submit one application for each theme. The minimum grant is £1,000 and you can apply for up to £25,000 per theme which pays a grant amount of 40% or 50% of either the expected average cost of item, or the actual cost if lower than the expected average cost. Here are some of the items available within the scheme that may be of interest:

Item(s)	Grant amount	Potential opportunities:
Automatic health and welfare monitoring system (AHW)	£8,774	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve heat detection and overall fertility • Improve health as other data such as rumination, eating times and body temperature is also monitored
Automatic calf feeder (AHW)	£9,498	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide consistency in terms of water temperature & milk powder quantity • Allow natural feeding behaviour through multiple, smaller meals • Free up time to monitor calves for disease & other problems.
Range of cattle crushes and handling systems (AHW)	Item dependent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow safer handling of cattle, especially during stressful times • Specialist items improve health and welfare e.g. foot trimming crushes
Automatic footbath (AHW)	£3,355	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automatically fill, doses, flushes & replenishes thus facilitates regular foot-bathing with minimal disruption to the milking routine • Reduce the operator's potential exposure to the active ingredients
Robotic silage pusher (AHW)	£6,800	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce labour and machinery required • Increase the number of feed push ups increases dry matter intake to improve herd performance
Robotic slurry pusher/collector (slurry management)	£9,466	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce labour and machinery required • Improve housing conditions • Reduce the risk of slipping

This is a competitive scheme and each item has a score. Grants will be awarded to the highest scoring applications and you may not receive any, or all, of the funding you apply for. The scheme opened on 28 May and will close at midday on 10 July 2025. If you are awarded a grant, the claim deadline is 31 March 2026.

We are encouraging all clients to consider the scheme now because there is no guarantee if there will be any more schemes in the future. Your consultant can help you develop a competitive application.

David Darlington specialises in both technical and business aspects of milk production, working across the Midlands and the North. He can be contacted on 07831 477296.



Genomic testing of dairy heifers

Ian Powell, Managing Director

Genomics is one of the most important technical developments of recent years but many dairy farmers could be making better use of the data that it provides. There are a range of organisations providing genomic testing, but often they are associated with semen sales. Our approach starts with the NMR Genetic Value Audit (GVA) of the herd to identify the range in key performance indices (£PLI, kg of fat & protein, fertility and SCC) which will identify the potential from genomic testing.

The table below is an example of the combined results for the 2nd, 3rd & 4th calvers in a herd which shows the PTA & performance differences for the Top 25% vs the Bottom 25%, which shows the huge difference in kg of milk at 1,991kg and the SCC difference of -214. The benefit of using genomic testing is to identify the best, mid-range and worst animals based on their genetic make-up and to use this information to decide on a mating plan using sexed semen, beef semen or to sell surplus heifers at an early stage.

	Top 25% value	Top 25% performance	Bottom 25% performance	Bottom 25% value	PTA Value difference (Top 25% vs bottom 25%)	Performance difference (Top 25% vs bottom 25%)
Milk PTA (kg)	326	10630	8638	-236	562	1991kg
Combined fat and pro PTA (kg)	23	717	713	-9	31	4kg
Fertility index vs calving interval	8.9	364	389	-1.8	11	24.4 days lower calving interval
SCC index vs lactation SCC	-14	33	247	3	-17	-214 lower SCC in latest lact
PLI vs productive daily yield (kg)	£325	26.9	25.2	£-28	353	1.7kg / productive day of life

In collaboration with NMR, we can now provide our clients with direct access to genomic testing backed up by independent breeding advice from our specialist Kevin Lane. The genomic testing takes around 4 weeks to provide the raw genomic data. Our breeding specialist then accesses the data and identifies the traits most important to you, which could include £PLI, kg fat & protein, SCC, fertility, locomotion, stature, etc. provided in a summary report. The aim of our service is to make better use of the genomic data and to help you to develop a clear breeding plan going forward. Our service is incorporated into the NMR genomic testing fee, which is typically £22/test for 50 tests per year. For more information speak to your consultant or contact the office.

Ian is responsible for our dairy cost database and MCi and works with clients across southern England. He can be contacted on 07831 617952.

In brief

Thermoduric counts in milk - From certain milk buyers we are starting to see increased interest in levels of thermoduric bacteria in milk. Thermoduric bacteria are heat resistant bacteria that can survive pasteurisation and can cause defects in milk products, such as reduced shelf life for milk or spoilage of cheese and butter. Silage, faeces, animal bedding, contaminated water supplies and soil all contain large numbers of thermoduric bacteria and are the most common sources of these bacteria in raw milk. While it will never be possible to completely exclude thermoduric bacteria from raw milk, there are certain steps which can be taken to significantly reduce their numbers.

The main areas to focus on are pre-milking teat preparation, poor parlour hygiene and inadequate plant cleaning. Taking more care to clean teats prior to milking, wearing gloves and keeping gloves clean during milking as well as ensuring there is sufficient hot water, at a high enough temperature, to adequately sanitise all parts of the milking equipment can all help control thermoduric counts in the milk.

Communication is key – successful dairy farming requires coordination, precision, and teamwork which in turn requires successful communication. Clear communication between farmers, employees, vets and consultants is essential for maintaining the health of all livestock. Early identification of illnesses or injuries relies on detailed observations being promptly and properly conveyed. If technology such as automatic health monitoring systems are used, are all staff properly trained and are protocols in place to implement an agreed course of action?

As consultants we tend to have different roles with different clients. In some situations, we work with large teams of multiple stakeholders, for example owners, managers, milkers, feeders, vets, accountants and finance providers. Face-to-face meetings can be indispensable in untangling complex issues and quick, decisive action is easiest when people can discuss something in detail in order to reach an agreement. Irrespective of the number of people involved, face-to-face meetings typically require a pre-agreed agenda to ensure that they stay relevant. Having invested time and resources in holding a meeting, attendees should have clear action points afterwards if goals are to be achieved.

Some clients utilise our experience to communicate with external agencies such as banks, Rural Payments Agency (RPA) or the Environment Agency (EA). Assisting with data collection for emissions calculations as required by many milk buyers is another task which frequently falls to consultants and requires interrogation of accounting systems and communication with suppliers to ensure accurate and evidenced data is collected.

As trusted advisors, we are perfectly placed to facilitate occasional or regular meetings for all stakeholders including multi-generational family farming partners to ensure that the correct information is available and relayed, ideas are debated and decisions can be made. Investing in communication strategies, whether through better training, record-keeping, technology or implementing regular focused meetings contributes to improved staff engagement and better outcomes.

Hot of the Press! As we go to print, Baroness Minette Batters (appointed by Defra's Secretary of State to lead the **Farming Profitability Review**) has issued an open letter to farmers and growers in England inviting views. Responses identifying three to four major barriers and/or opportunities related to profitability and corresponding solutions will be co-ordinated by sector representatives. The review will help inform the development of the Food Strategy, Farming Roadmap and the Land Use Framework. Keep your eye on the press for this opportunity to influence government strategy.

The Dairy Group is a private limited company established in 2004 with 15 consultants and 2 support staff. We deliver a wide range of technical and business services to dairy farmers across the UK with specialist milking technology advice provided internationally.

Our clients range from herds of 100 – 2,500 dairy cows and different dairy management systems including organic, regenerative & conventional, robotic milking, all-year round & block calving and grazing, low input to fully housed and everything in-between. We pride ourselves in providing independent advice to help our clients make strategic decisions, innovate and turn ambition into impact. We achieve this by having a thorough understanding of the technical, business and environmental developments in the sector.

Please contact Karen or Anne in our Taunton admin team on 01823 444488 or visit our website for further information or to contact our consultants.

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