

Adding straw to silage cuts winter feed costs

FARMERS could save £60 per cow in forage costs this winter by adding straw to suckler cow rations.

Seth Wareing, Keenan nutritionist, said a shortage of first cut silage in many parts of the country, coupled with straw shortages, was a real concern for many suckler herd managers.

But he said Keenan's latest costings showed that scrimping on straw this winter need not be necessary when it is used to bulk out rations.

He said: "Including straw in diets has a double effect. Firstly, it slows intakes so cows eat less silage – essential in a winter when conserved forages will be at a premium – and it helps to firm the dung, meaning less straw is needed for bedding."

Mr Wareing said that on a typical ad-lib feed system, suckler cows will take 40kg of silage and 1kg of straw a day.

"Whereas when fed a Mech-Fiber mixed ration with straw included, they will be full on

17kg of silage and 5kg of straw. This has the potential to reduce total forage use by 20 to 30 per cent," he said.

With silage costing at £30/t of dry matter and straw at £100/t of dry matter, ad-lib feeding would result in a daily feed cost of £1.30/cow, whereas a mixed ration with straw included would only cost £1.01/cow a day.

"Over a typical 200-day winter housing period, this equates to £60/cow in savings," said Mr Wareing.

"On top of this, the quantity of silage needed by cows is vastly reduced, meaning better quality silage can be fed to youngstock, or simply less silage can be made and more stock can be grazed through the summer."

He said the straw-based Mech-Fiber rationing was particularly applicable to spring-calving cows which don't need to be fed heavily through the winter.

"Where spring-calving cows have been well managed through the summer, they will enter the

winter in good condition and should be managed to lose a bit of this condition over the winter before they calve," said Mr Wareing.

"Cows should be making the best use of grazed grass in summer to reduce the need to make silage for winter feeding. It is far more economic for the cow to graze the grass and build condition on her back than it is to make silage."

Wheat straw is the preferred option for inclusion in rations but, if in short supply, alternatives such as rape straw and pea haulm can be used instead.

Mr Wareing said rape straw should be used 50:50 with wheat straw to guard against the high potassium levels it contains.

"Poor quality, long-stem storage silage and low quality hay can also be used as straw alternatives," he said.

"The quantity will depend on the quality of the main forage being used, and the body condition of the cows."