



Put feet first to exploit late-season grass

Focusing on cow mobility is key to ensuring herds can make the most of this year's extended grazing season. So what should producers take time to consider?



TEXT PHIL EADES

With pressure on winter forage stocks being reported in many parts of the UK, some producers will be looking to keep cows out at grazing for longer this year. And the Stride Mobility Initiative highlighted that it will be vital to keep a close eye on mobility if the value of extended grazing is to be fully exploited.

Stride was established as a major industry-wide initiative, committed to helping dairy producers reduce the consequences of compromised mobility in their herds, to improve productivity and reduce losses. The partners in the Stride Initiative are Ceva, HerdVision, Hoofcount, IVC Farm Vets, Neogen, NoBACZ, Teemore Engineering and Zinpro. HerdVision's veterinary technical adviser Georgia Thresh says the same weather conditions that contributed to reduced grass-silage stocks may open the door to an extended grazing period this year. "Ground conditions are, generally, still favourable, and it will take a prolonged wet spell before grazing becomes compromised. So, understandably, producers will be keen to keep cows out for as long as possible to exploit autumn grazing and preserve silage stocks," she says.

"However, it is essential to remember that cows will face mobility challenges that need to be monitored

and reacted to if cows are to graze effectively and have sound feet when they are finally housed. Adopting best-practice management, which will be familiar on most units, will be the foundation of making the most of late-season grass," adds Ms Thresh.

Timely treatment

Early identification of cows with compromised mobility will remain crucial because spotting problems sooner allows effective and timely treatment. She says that regular mobility-scoring is the starting point. "Try to mobility-score cows at least twice a week, and don't rely on just watching cows as they walk to and from pasture. Ideally, score cows walking on concrete for the most-effective early identification. And don't just pay close attention to the cows who hang back – lame cows are not all at the back of the group." ►



Georgia Thresh:
"Producers should considering investing in a mobile footbath"



Regular footbathing: consider investing in mobile facilities

- ◀ To help reduce sole bruising and white line disease (WLD) problems, she adds that tracks need to be carefully maintained and should be as smooth and wide as possible. Producers should also try to minimise walking distances where they can. “Preventative foot trimming is still essential and should prioritise fresh calvers and cows just before drying off. Producers need to aim for zero lameness in dry and fresh calvers to ensure that cows transition as smoothly as possible.

Poaches pastures

“And don’t forget regular footbathing, particularly if cows are walking through poached autumn pastures, and ensure that they spend time on concrete after the footbath before going out to graze.”

Many of the more common conditions affecting foot health can be associated with extended grazing, meaning they require close attention. Digital dermatitis thrives in wet, muddy conditions such as gateways, around water trough areas and on muddy tracks, particularly in high-traffic areas. These risks increase with extended grazing.

So Ms Thresh urges producers to take care in high-traffic areas to minimise damp spots. “Consider investing in hardstanding at gateways and around water troughs, and avoid issues with water pooling by maintaining tracks. Producers should continue routine footbathing and considering investing in a mobile footbath if required.”

Emma Millar:
**“Check total diet
 provides sufficient
 trace minerals”**



White line disease can also be a problem when cows are out grazing. Stones from poorly maintained cow tracks and sideways forces on the foot weaken the white line, increasing the opportunity for bacteria to penetrate it and move into the corium.

“Any causes of shearing movements or forces are recognised as risk factors for WLD,” explains Ms Thresh. “Conditions at grazing can result in increased exposure to shearing, including poor cow flow, abrupt changes in speed or direction of flow. So ensure there is plenty of access to water troughs to reduce competition, avoid bottlenecks in cow flow and avoid uneven, stony and muddy surfaces.

“Early detection of cases is really important to prevent progression of an abscess,” she adds. “WLD is often more painful than other claw horn lesions, so early detection and treatment is key.”

Finally, Ms Thresh emphasises the risk of bruising and sole ulcers, which is potentially higher at grazing due to less natural wear on the claw compared to concrete, causing overgrown horn, long toes and increased pressure on the heel. Standing times during this period can also increase, particularly if cows are walking longer distances out to grazing. Stony tracks are another cause of sole bruising.

Diet is also important when helping improve foot health at extended grazing. Zinpro’s Emma Millar stresses the importance of trace-element nutrition in maintaining foot condition.

Trace elements

“Grass is not particularly rich in the key trace elements needed to support foot health, and late-season grazing can be an even poorer source of minerals,” she explains. “Manganese plays a key role in strengthening ligaments and tendons. Copper helps maintain the collagen fibres that support the pedal bone, while zinc is essential for overall hoof strength. Biotin plays a crucial role in helping harden the hoof. “So producers should check that the total diet is providing sufficient trace minerals. Compensating for any shortfall in grazed grass will help ensure that cows have more robust feet heading into the winter,” she adds.

Extended grazing offers an opportunity to underpin margins this winter, reducing short-term feed costs and preserving forage stocks going into the winter. Anything that compromises a cow’s ability to graze efficiently will reduce the benefits of keeping cows out at grass for longer.

Ms Thresh stresses that close attention to mobility will help exploit the value of grazing “So avoid cutting back on preventative measures like footbathing and trimming just because the cows are out, and use the EDPET – early detection and prompt effective treatment – methodology when meeting the challenge of improving mobility and foot health.

“The sooner a lesion is identified and treated, the faster the cow’s recovery, and the lower the risk of chronic changes developing,” she adds. “Once a lame cow has been identified, she should be examined within 48 hours, and a correct programme of effective treatment actioned depending on the lesion type.” |