AHDB BEEF & LAMB

Event report

September 2017

Better Returns Programme

Using data to improve yields from forage

The Kent Grazing Group visited Matt Ford's dairy herd near Herstmonceux Castle, East Sussex, to look at how he measures grass covers and uses the information. Although the farm has had paddocks and tracks for over 20 years, Matt has started to take grazing management more seriously in the last few years.

Matt and his family farm 600 pure Holstein and Holstein crossbred cows and have moved towards autumn block calving, which starts in mid-August. The cows calve outdoors and are then housed at night. They have access to a maize and grass silage total mixed ration (TMR), but still graze during the day. They are housed full time from October to allow easier management at service. They begin grazing during the day again from mid-February and then move to being out all day when grass growth is increasing. The cows are currently producing around 8,000 litres per year with a target set of 8,500 litres.

Matt walks his fields weekly with a plate meter and uses Agrinet to record the data. He uses it to predict supply versus demand. Demand is generally around 70kg dry matter (DM) per hectare per day, which can be matched by growth rates in May and June. Deferred grazing is used to make up the deficit in early spring and buffer feeding or in-parlour feeding is used to manage deficits later in the season.

The aim is for most of the silage to be cut from fields not within the grazing platform. As only clamp silage is made, any silage cuts from the grazing platform need to be made strategically to ensure it is worth opening up the clamp. As grass yield declines into summer, cows are dried off and moved onto marsh grass, which allows the grazing platform to recover before calving starts again.

Matt has just finished a parlour refurbishment and building a new shed for his heifers. The parlour refurbishment means that he will be able to collect data on daily milk yield, which will ensure grazing and feed management is optimised.