

Getting more meat from grass

Liz Genever and Somerset beef farmer Ed Green staged an entertaining double act at one of the Grassland & Muck forums in May, proving that grazed grass can drive a profitable enterprise.

Ed rotationally grazes 844 growing cattle in various-sized mobs around the land he farms – all on custom feed agreements that give him a known pence/head/day return.

Comparable with bought-in feed

When grass is good, it is very, very good – nutritionally comparable for energy content and higher in protein than bought-in feed – but at a quarter of the cost.

This table shows figures for when grass is grazed – if the grass is clamped or baled the feed cost per kg doubles. Picking up the phone and asking a feed merchant to deliver it doubles the cost again, said Liz.



Spring grass (grazed)		Bought-in concentrate	
DM	20%	DM	86%
ME	11.5 MJ	ME	10-12 MJ
CP	22%	CP	16-18%
Cost	8p/kg DM	Cost	32p/kg DM

Admitting there are pros and cons of grazing; she went on to say that those that graze successfully tackle the down-sides, such as variable feed supply and quality, pro-actively. The key she said, was to keep the grass growing at as high a quality as possible, for as long as possible.

Achieving this requires management to regularly produce fresh, new grass for the stock to eat.

Sward height targets, which have been derived from research and determine the best level for animals to enter and leave an area of grass, are a good starting point. Researchers found that following these guidelines produced 20% more grass or an extra 1.7t/ha – worth £170 if replaced by silage or £544 if replaced by concentrates.

Liz encouraged producers to invest in their grassland and to grow as much as possible. Taking soil samples and taking any remedial action required can make a big difference, eg soils at pH 4.5 will grow 10% less grass than soils at pH 6 to 6.5. Controlling weeds will also boost grass yields.

Growing cattle on grass

Ed Green does not own any cattle himself, but carries 844 animals for other people on parcels of grassland, permanent pasture and leys, near Shepton Mallet in Somerset.

They arrive as five-month-old stores weighing 200kg and are taken through to 460kg.

“The expensive and time-consuming bit of beef production is growing the calf to 200kg and the last little bit getting them to 500kg and finished,” explained Ed.

“We can grow good quality grass and we graze it with the type of animals that can make best use of it. Grass is not just somewhere beef cattle go before going into a shed to be finished – it can contribute a great deal to the meat production process.

“We keep the system as simple as possible, grazing large mobs of cattle from 150-250 in number, depending on the size of the field. I am allergic to electric fences, so we use the hedgerows and cattle numbers to manage the grass. The trick is to graze and move, graze and move, so there is always new growth for them. They usually move after three days in one field.

“We take the sward heights down quite short to 5-6cm, but this still meets their nutritional requirements. Grazing hard also keeps the weeds down. We don’t apply fertiliser to the grazing land. If any grass gets ahead of itself we manage it by adding more cattle – I try not to use machinery if I can help it.

“Being paid a set rate for each animal, for each day they are with me, is an incentive to carry as much stock as possible, as efficiently as possible. Using grazed grass allows me to do this.

“Of course we do need a Plan B should things like the weather go against us – like sticking cattle in a shed temporarily or applying fertiliser. But so far we have never had to revert to Plan B!”