TOMORROW'S FARMER

FEBRUARY / 2026 / ISSUE 77

Feeding to keep cows healthy

The dairy industry is facing a tough period, getting through this will rely heavily on feeding strategies that protect cow health. This is not an area where corners can be cut without consequence.

While milk price pressure often shifts attention towards yield alone, it is vital to balance this with a strong focus on cow health, fertility and overall margin.

Reviewing costs within the business is sensible, but decisions should not be rushed. Many of the costs already in place were introduced for a reason and are delivering benefits to the herd, even if those benefits are not immediately visible. Some cost cutting measures may appear to improve profit in the short term, but the longer-term impact on performance, health and longevity can easily outweigh any saving made.

It has never been more important to assess where money is being spent, but this should be done with support from the full advisory team. Input from your vet, nutritionist, foot trimmer and genetic company help ensure that any changes made are considered from all angles. Taking this joined up approach reduces risk and avoids unintended consequences elsewhere in the system.

There are several areas that can be reviewed immediately. Rebalancing the ration to feed more efficiently, making the most of available forages, adjusting cow management or housing, and keeping longevity at the centre of decisions are all practical starting points.

It is easy to look at a ration and make small reductions that appear to cost only one or two litres of milk. The risk lies in the knock-on effects that can follow. The ration does far more than drive yield. It supports fertility, transition performance, colostrum quality, foot health and helps reduce the risk of metabolic disorders. Undermining any of these areas can quickly lead to higher costs elsewhere.

Switching to a cheaper concentrate can be tempting, but it is always worth understanding why it is cheaper. Often this comes down to ingredient changes, particularly protein sources. Each protein source brings different characteristics, and losing certain ones may affect rumen function or performance. A more effective approach is to ask your advisor to review the ration and identify where efficiency can be improved, for example by reducing excess protein rather than removing valuable ingredients altogether.

Reduced forage stocks remain a concern on many farms. Over the past year cows have often been fed more due to limited grass growth and poorer grazing conditions. With milk prices under pressure this can be hard to justify, but forage remains essential for rumen fill and overall diet structure. Measuring forage stocks accurately and exploring ways to maximise their use is critical.

While reviewing ration efficiency it is also worth considering whether all cows are being fed the same diet. Lower yielding cows may be receiving more than they require. Where space and management allow, splitting the herd into high and low yield groups with separate rations can improve overall efficiency without compromising performance.

Finally, longevity should remain a core focus for both the herd and the business. Youngstock represent the future milking herd, and transition cows must not be compromised nutritionally. Cutting back in these areas can have long lasting and damaging effects that are difficult and costly to reverse.

MEGAN HERRIOT 07985 305913
RUMINANT SPECIALIST

Lambing diseases and how they can be mitigated

Most lambing problems are predictable and preventable. If lamb losses rise, look back at ewe nutrition first. Good feeding doesn't just improve performance; it prevents disease before it starts.

From feed trough to lambing shed: preventing disease through nutrition

Many of the health problems seen at lambing are often blamed on weather, hygiene or bad luck. In reality, a large proportion of ewe and lamb disease can begin weeks earlier at the feed trough.

Late pregnancy is the most demanding stage of a ewe's year, where lamb growth accelerates, rumen space is reduced, and the margin for error becomes very small. If feeding does not keep pace with rising energy, protein and mineral demand, problems can develop quickly.

Why late pregnancy is high risk

In the final six weeks before lambing, foetal growth increases sharply while the expanding uterus limits forage intake. Unless diets are matched to litter size, forage quality and ewe condition, shortfalls are almost inevitable.

The consequences include twin lamb disease, milk fever, grass staggers, poor colostrum production, weak lambs and higher lamb losses.

Feeding alone isn't enough — monitoring matters

Feed tables are useful, but good flocks don't just feed they monitor.

Key indicators include body condition score (BCS), feeding behaviour and lamb outcomes.

Ewes should be condition-scored at scanning, six weeks pre-lambing and again two to three weeks before lambing. Loss of more than 0.5 BCS in late pregnancy is a serious warning sign.

Ewes hanging back, being bullied or failing to come to feed are often the first signs of trouble. Weak lambs, watery mouth, joint ill and hypothermia frequently reflect nutritional problems that occurred weeks earlier.

Twin lamb disease starts before lambing

Pregnancy toxaemia (twin lamb disease) results from inadequate energy intake in late pregnancy. When glucose supply falls, ewes mobilise body fat, leading to ketosis and liver damage. Twin- and triplet-bearing ewes are at greatest risk.

Once a ewe is down, treatment success is limited — prevention is far more effective. Risk is reduced by feeding to scan results, increasing energy density without increasing bulk, splitting concentrates into multiple feeds and ensuring adequate trough space.

Milk Fever and Grass Staggers

Milk fever (low calcium) and grass staggers (low magnesium) are both linked to reduced feed intake and inconsistent mineral supply around lambing.

Milk fever often presents at lambing with weak or collapsed ewes that respond well to early treatment. Grass staggers can cause sudden deaths, particularly where magnesium intake fluctuates or forage potassium levels are high.

Consistent feed intake, reliable mineral supplementation and avoiding long fasting periods are key prevention measures. Magnesium supply, in particular, must be continuous — interruptions can cause problems within days.

Prolapse risk and body condition

Over-fat ewes and bulky, low-energy diets increase abdominal pressure in late pregnancy, raising the risk of vaginal prolapse and difficult lambing's.

Avoiding over-conditioning earlier in the year, allowing enough feed space, grouping ewes by condition as well as litter size, balancing forage and concentrates all help reduce risk.

Colostrum: where lamb disease really starts

Colostrum intake in the first few hours of life is the single most important factor in lamb survival. Both quantity and quality depend heavily on ewe nutrition in the final month before lambing.

Poor nutrition leads to low antibody levels, increasing the risk of watery mouth, joint ill, septicaemia and early lamb deaths.

These diseases are often blamed on hygiene, but the underlying cause is frequently under-feeding weeks earlier.

STUART GOUGH 07854 955778
RUMINANT DEVELOPMENT

Intestinal worms – a familiar feature

Intestinal worms are a familiar feature in many poultry systems, particularly where birds have access to range or are kept on the same ground for extended periods. Because they are so common, low level worm challenges are often accepted as part of the job.

In reality, even modest burdens can quietly undermine flock performance and bird welfare long before obvious problems are seen.

Most worm species affecting poultry live in the gut and interfere with digestion and nutrient uptake. Birds may continue to eat well, but the feed is used less efficiently, which shows up as slower growth, poorer feed conversion or a gradual drop in egg numbers. In laying flocks, egg quality is often the first warning sign, with more seconds, paler shells and lighter yolks appearing while birds still look outwardly healthy. Flock uniformity can also suffer, with a widening gap between the best and worst birds.

A range of different worms may be involved. Large roundworms such as Ascaridia galli are common and can reach several centimetres in length. Hairworms, Capillaria species, are much smaller but can cause significant irritation to the gut lining. Caecal worms, Heterakis gallinarum, usually cause little direct damage themselves but are important because they can carry Histomonas meleagridis, which leads to blackhead disease. Gapeworm, although less frequently seen, can cause severe respiratory signs, especially in younger birds. Tapeworms are also encountered, particularly in free range systems, and rely on insects or slugs to complete their life cycle.

The challenge with worms is that infection pressure builds up over time. Eggs are shed in droppings and can survive for long periods in damp soil and litter. Birds become infected by ingesting these eggs directly or by eating infected insects and earthworms while foraging. Wet weather, poached ground, poor litter quality and repeated use of the same range areas all increase the risk, particularly during winter housing periods followed by turnout.

Clinical signs vary depending on worm burden but often include poor growth, uneven birds, diarrhoea, weight loss and pale combs linked to anaemia. In breeder flocks, reduced fertility and hatchability are frequently associated with ongoing worm challenge. The additional stress placed on birds can also increase feather pecking and leave flocks more open to secondary disease.

Managing worms effectively requires a planned, preventative approach rather than reacting once problems are obvious. Diagnosis can be confirmed through post mortem examination or faecal egg counts, but routine monitoring by opening a small number of birds can be just as valuable. Licensed anthelmintics such as flubendazole, fenbendazole, levamisole or piperazine remain effective tools when used correctly, although it is important to remember that most products targeting roundworms are not effective against tapeworms. Withdrawal periods for eggs and meat must always be observed.

Good control also relies on reducing reinfection. Maintaining dry, friable litter, managing range condition, rotating paddocks, controlling insects and avoiding excessive stocking pressure all help to lower worm challenge. When combined with a suitable treatment programme, these measures support better gut health, more consistent performance and improved flock welfare.

For practical advice tailored to your system, your Crediton Milling poultry representative can help review parasite control, nutrition and overall flock management.

DAVID SMALL 07711 780858
POULTRY SPECIALIST

The importance of forage production

Last year's drought was a stark reminder that forage production remains one of the greatest risk areas on livestock farms.

Weather is outside our control, but exposure to risk can be reduced through better cropping choices, closer grassland management and a more considered approach to fertiliser use.

A key part of that resilience is avoiding over reliance on a single forage crop or a narrow range of grass ley ages. Mixed forage systems spread both weather and establishment risk and give more options when one element underperforms. Multi species leys continue to show value in dry periods, particularly where deep rooting species such as chicory and plantain are included. These plants can access moisture deeper in the soil profile, supporting summer growth, while legumes help reduce dependence on bagged nitrogen. Grass variety choice also matters. Varieties with stronger summer growth and better recovery after stress should be prioritised ahead of headline yield figures. Where soils and location allow, flexible forage crops such as wholecrop cereals or forage maize can provide an important buffer, offering an alternative source of forage when grass growth disappoints.

Ley age and rotation planning are often overlooked but play a major role in drought performance. Older leys tend to suffer more in dry conditions, often due to compaction, weed ingress and shallower root systems. Identifying fields that consistently struggle and planning proactive reseeding is far preferable to reacting after a failure year. Spreading reseeding over several seasons also reduces establishment risk and workload pressure.

Grassland management becomes even more critical when moisture is limited. Grazing too tightly in dry conditions slows regrowth and weakens root systems, while maintaining higher residuals supports root mass and improves recovery once rainfall returns. Soil health underpins all of this and is one of the most underestimated risk factors in forage production. Compaction restricts rooting depth and water infiltration, so regular soil structure assessments, targeted aeration where needed and careful traffic management all contribute to better drought tolerance. Organic matter levels are equally important. Higher organic matter improves water holding capacity, and slurry, farmyard manure and digestate should be viewed as soil conditioners as well as nutrient sources.

Fertiliser strategy also needs to move away from habit and towards precision. Nitrogen efficiency drops sharply in dry conditions, and applying fertiliser simply because it is in the diary increases cost risk without guaranteed return. Matching nitrogen applications to soil moisture and growth potential, splitting doses and considering stabilised or protected products where volatilisation risk is high can all improve efficiency. Regular soil testing for pH, phosphorus and potassium remains essential, as correcting pH improves nutrient uptake and overall grass resilience. Slurry applications should be targeted to fields with the highest response potential and the lowest run off risk.

As summers become more unreliable, making the most of grass growth in spring and autumn is increasingly important. Early spring growth should be prioritised on responsive fields with good drainage and soil temperatures, avoiding blanket applications in favour of targeted inputs. Early grazing encourages tillering and sets the crop up for the season ahead.

Effective risk management is not about predicting the next drought but being prepared for it. Building forage buffers where possible, reviewing stocking rates against realistic forage supply rather than best case years, and treating grass with the same planning and scrutiny as maize or cereals all help reduce exposure. Farms that cope best in dry years tend to be those with flexible systems, healthy soils and a clear plan for when conditions turn against them.

MARK TUCKER 07703 734530
FORAGE SPECIALIST