

forage watch

with Micron Bio-Systems

What a season we are having. Mole Valley Farmers' Graham Ragg thinks that while turnout will have been delayed by at least a month for many livestock farmers, the recent warm weather means grass will be starting to grow. Now is the time to apply any fertiliser to make every day count and help bolster dwindling forage stocks.

In the north, Newbreed UK's Richard Rolfe says he



“We really need to look ahead this season to make sure we are not caught out
Richard Rolfe

Part three in this sponsored series sees our two contributors – New Breed UK's **Richard Rolfe** and Mole Valley Farmers' **Graham Ragg** – look at the prospects for alternatives to grass silage.

We may need to look at alternatives to grass



Some producers will need to increase their maize acreage to make up for unsown winter cereals.

would normally have customers taking silage crops towards the end of April, but with daytime temperatures of under 5degC in the first week of the month, it's taken a while for the grass to get growing again.

Forage stocks are starting to run low. “I have some customers feeding silage that is three to four years old,” says Mr Rolfe. “So we really need to look ahead this season to make sure we are not caught out by another year like 2012.”

“Winter cereal acreage may be down, but spring cereals offer a good opportunity to compensate for this,” suggests Mr Ragg.

Farmers in marginal maize growing areas such as northern coastal regions

should consider switching to whole-crop for ensiling. Further south, farmers in the arable areas would be well advised to increase their maize acreage to replace any winter cereals that were not drilled.

Wholecrop

“I have seen a big increase in the amount of whole-crop being grown in the north-west, particularly in the marginal maize growing areas which have suffered over the past two years,” says Mr Rolfe.

“Because wholecrop is harvested earlier than maize, it provides the opportunity to reseed in the back end of the growing season.”

Mr Ragg says: “Maize can be planted when soil tempera-

tures reach 8-10degC, which some will already be seeing. It goes without saying maize planting will be later this year than last.

“Some farmers drilled too early last year (at the end of March or early April) and ended up re-drilling as crops struggled to establish in the wet and cold weather.

“Because of this year's weather, most growers will probably have to wait a little bit longer before sowing maize this time.”

Mr Rolfe suggests getting maize in the ground early will benefit the bulk and maturity of the crop. “However, you need to wait until the soil reaches the right temperature and there is no further risk of frost.

“Recent challenging sum-



“Lucerne crops can be sown when soil temperatures warm up
Graham Ragg

mers have seen a reduction in the maize acreage in the north, though some farmers are taking the view that at some point we must have a good summer.”

Despite the nutritional aspects of lucerne, this is still a marginal crop. However, studies have shown that the inclusion of lucerne silage in dairy cow diets can improve forage intake, and increase output of milk protein with no change in milk fat.

“Lucerne crops can be sown when soil temperatures warm up,” advises Mr Ragg. “And while the crop requires careful management, if you follow the

guidelines there is nothing difficult about it.”

Focus

The focus for the coming year should be to replenish forage stocks and look closely at which crops are grown. Make sure what you are planning fits with where you are in the country and assume the weather will do its best to disrupt the season.

Protect what you grow. “More farmers are seeing the benefits of controlling maize eyespot diseases to give higher yields and increased starch levels,” says Mr Ragg.

Also protect what you have harvested – use a good



quality inoculant which contains two strains of lactic acid bacteria to cover the full fermentation range, helping save considerable dry matter losses. A good additive will also contain a stability component such as lactobacillus Brevis which creates acetic acid on exposure to oxygen at the silage face which will retard yeast and mould growth.

Inoculants including enzymes will also aid digestibility and energy potential of the crop, adding up to 1MJ/kg dry matter in published studies.