

Information note

Winter 2017: potential forage shortages in Scotland, Northern Ireland and North Western England

Potential livestock health and production problems

December 2017

Several reports have indicated that there is a potential shortage of forage on farms for this winter in Scotland, Northern Ireland and in the north west of England. Some of the forage which has been collected in the late summer and autumn is also of poorer quality, due to the lower temperatures and wetter conditions experienced in the latter half of the season. Although there may also be a lack of forage on a few farms in the remainder of England and Wales, the forecast is that forage is in good supply in these areas.

The potential for health, welfare and production problems in ruminants varies depending on the types of production, and will be associated with feeding insufficient forage of reasonable quality or poorer quality forage made with low metabolisable energy. There is also greater risk of infectious disease and lower resistance to parasites for animals on a lower plane of nutrition and an increased risk of diseases associated with feeding soil-contaminated forage.

Dairy cows

- Lower milk yields
- Increased subclinical or clinical ketosis
- Reduced fertility
- Digestion problems.
- Mineral and energy deficiencies
- Increased risk and lower tolerance to endoparasites e.g. liver fluke.

To compensate for the poorer quality forage and to try to maintain the animals' performance, increased concentrate feeding may be employed, although this can increase

the risk of metabolic disease, in particular ruminal acidosis and laminitis. Feed changes should be made gradually.

Suckler cows and Sheep

- While the metabolic requirements of suckler cows and sheep are lower than dairy cows, feeding insufficient or poorer quality forage can affect fertility.
- Low energy silage or straw-based diets have been associated with rumen impaction in suckler cows.
- Later in pregnancy ewes will have higher risk of energy deficit leading to 'twin lamb disease' and hypocalcaemia if they are not adequately fed or supplemented
- Lower birth weights of calves and lambs from cows or ewes which are under-fed.
- Production of colostrum may be affected which in turn can affect the defence of the new born to disease threats. Poorer milk yields occur in animals on a lower plain of nutrition and agalactia (complete lack of milk) can occur in ewes.
- Growing animals will fail to attain optimal weight gain if fed insufficient or poor quality forage.
- The feeding of soil-contaminated forage can contribute to digestive and metabolic disorders and risks for example diseases such as listeriosis, *Bacillus licheniformis* and fungal infections.

Bedding

In addition to poor quality and insufficient silage, there were also problems getting onto land to cut silage and harvest straw. Where straw is in short supply prices are likely to rise and other species may be affected if there is a shortage of good quality bedding, including pigs and horses. These factors could force some farmers to cut back the amount of straw used for bedding on farms. A reduced amount of bedding increases the amount of faecal contamination of housed animals. This will raise the risk of diseases such as mastitis, especially in dairy cows, and alimentary disease resulting in diarrhoea in all ages of livestock but the highest risk will be in neonatal and young animals. An increased risk of opportunist infection of the reproductive tract in animals giving birth is also associated with dirty bedding. Reduced bedding can also adversely affect the management of respiratory disease. Using less bedding will result in dirtier animals which can affect their suitability for presentation at abattoirs. Farmers may seek to find alternative types of bedding such as waste paper, or recycled wood shavings, but these can also be associated with difficulties, and present different management challenges.

There may also be issues associated with poaching of fields following recent rain onto already sodden ground, especially around livestock feeding areas, and the increased risk of foot and skin problems as well as increasing potential reservoirs of infection, for example if salmonella is present. Veterinary advice should therefore be sought.

Veterinary surgeons need to be aware of these risks so they can best advise their farmer clients through health planning. Advice may need to be sought from the livestock industry levy boards and specific advice on feed and nutrition from specialists. Charities may need to be approached if farmers find themselves facing hardship.

Useful links and further information

The Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) has useful information and advice for farmers in relation to fodder management, including storage, and on dealing with winter feeding of livestock on beef and sheep farms with limited fodder supplies on beef & sheep farms: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/fodder>

AHDB Beef and Lamb publications on nutrition and forage:
<http://beefandlamb.ahdb.org.uk/returns/nutrition-and-forage/>

Alternatives to straw bedding for pigs:

https://pork.ahdb.org.uk/media/2099/15_Bedding-options-for-the-English-pig-industry.pdf.
<https://pork.ahdb.org.uk/media/273607/enrichment-guide-2017.pdf>

Additional information is available through Farming Connect publications on [alternative bedding materials](#) and [preparing a winter feed budget](#). In addition, Farming Connects locally based team of development officers, located throughout Wales (**Wales only service**) are also on hand to provide advice and guidance.

Web: <http://www.gov.wales/farmingconnect>

Phone: Service Centre – 08456 000 813 Email: farmingconnect@menterabusnes.co.uk

Information about the APHA, SAC-CVS and AFBI veterinary laboratory networks in the UK:

- APHA in England & Wales: <http://ahvla.defra.gov.uk/vet-gateway/surveillance/diagnostic/index.htm>
- SAC-CVS in Scotland: https://www.sruc.ac.uk/info/120144/farm_animal_diagnostics

AFBI in Northern Ireland: <https://www.afbini.gov.uk/articles/animal-disease-diagnostic-services#toc-1>