Article for Farm n Equine, October 2009 issue

## MAKING THE MOST OF LATE SEASON GRASS

**In the first of a new series of topical livestock nutrition articles, Rumenco technical manager David Thornton highlights the declining feed value in grazed grass at this time of year, and offers useful advice on how to keep cattle growing on target right through to housing and the switch to winter rations.**

The weather in September has been generally warm and fair – certainly for the first half of the month – and the sight of cows still at grass while the sun shines has been a welcome boost for many livestock farmers after what has been another disappointingly wet summer.

However, although grass may still be visibly growing in early October and looking plentiful in some areas of the country, its quality is definitely declining rapidly. Water soluble carbohydrate levels drop when the days get shorter and solar radiation reduces. Autumn grass is also usually wetter than summer grass and the extra bulk and dilution of nutrients will limit intake and diet utilisation. Shorter days also mean fewer grazing hours and this all can add up to cattle growth rates dropping off a cliff unless action is taken. It's true that many cattle producers recognise this nutritional fact and early October is around the time that they start thinking about whether or not to feed concentrates to grazing youngstock, in particular. However, many fail to recognise that there are pitfalls in this approach.

Whilst growing cattle often need some supplementation around now, feeding even small amounts of concentrates can cause substitution of grass dry matter intake, simply because the rumen bugs needed to ferment either fibre (pasture) or starch (concentrates) are quite different and don't get on. The rumen can go out of synchrony and the result is expensive and disappointing performance.

Cattle will eat concentrates in preference to grass, which is acceptable in a very dry summer, but not particularly efficient in a green, lush summer as has been the case once again this year when there has been plenty of grass available. Remember, grass is the cheapest feed on the farm at around 1p/kg DM compared with rolled barley at 12p/kg DM (based on £100/tonne), so it makes sense to utilise it fully. In fact, an ability to make the most from grazed grass is what often separates the profitable livestock holding from one struggling to make ends meet.

Keeping cattle growing is vital at this time of year. And to help producers continue to hit growth targets, we often recommend the introduction of feed blocks where grass quality

is falling away – simply because this supplementary feeding method offers a whole host of benefits.

Trial work with feed blocks has shown that they can promote an improved mean daily liveweight gain (DLWG) of 0.24kg over feeding no supplements at all, fuller pasture utilisation and heavier weaning weights (see trial summary).

Blocks are also more convenient than most other supplementary feed systems – another valued benefit during what is usually a very busy period on many farms. Mixed farms, in particular, have usually had all their focus on the cereal harvest just as the cattle growth rates are dropping because of the lower quality grass. Diverting labour every day to feed cattle often is just not possible.

Feeding blocks not only supplies more energy against declining grass digestibility, it also provides supplementary protein, vitamins and minerals as well, which are so important for health and thrive.

Block consumption also closely matches grass availability, results in very good pasture utilisation and promotes less variation in individual performance within a group of cattle. This offers tremendous advantages for producers selling batches of weaned calves and dairy farmers wishing to serve batches of bulling heifers of a more even size and weight.

Separate panel

**Benefits of Autumn Block Feeding: a trial summary**

Semi-intensive beef on late summer/autumn grazing

Results from five farm trials highlight just how effective Rumevite feedblocks can be as a labour-saving method of improving the growth rates of beef cattle on poorer quality late season grazing.

The studies, involving 156 Friesian, Charolais X Friesian and Hereford X Friesian steers and heifers with an average initial liveweight of 305kg, ran for a 105 day period from mid summer through to housing. Cattle on grass only were compared with grazing cattle that also had access to Cattle Booster blocks.

| | **ANIMAL PERFORMANCE** | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Grazing Group** | **Grazing + Block Fed Group** |
| Weight at start (mid summer) | 304.6kg | 304.6kg |
| Weight at housing | 359.1kg | 384.4kg |
| Extra liveweight gain | | + 25.3kg |
| DLWG (104.6 days) | 0.52kg | 0.73kg |
| Extra DLWG | | + 0.24kg |

Whilst there is a supplementary feed cost associated with block feeding (around 17p/head/day), the extra weight gain they promote as a result of maximising what nutritional value there is in the forage translated to an extra margin over the 105 day period of £15/head.

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**Picture of David Thornton:**

David Thornton has been with Rumenco for 28 years. He is a respected nutritionist and has helped many beef, dairy and sheep producers maximise the value of home grown forages through cost-effective supplementary feeding of Rumevite feedblocks, Supalyx buckets and the wider range of Rumenco feed products.

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