

Checklist for making best use of limited straw stocks



Despite additional hectares of straw being made available by cereal growers, there is still likely to be a shortage due to lower yields and an increased requirement for feeding. It is important to assess your needs now and plan for any deficit.

The solutions to any shortfall will be different for each individual farm, but the following list of actions will help reduce the straw required over the coming winter. Bear in mind that, despite the acute situation this year, it is likely that straw availability will continue to be an issue, and it's worth considering long-term solutions alongside actions for this year.

General

- Involve your nutritionist/adviser at an early stage
- Work out how much straw you will need for bedding and feeding over the winter in a worst-case scenario, and calculate whether there will be a deficit
- Weigh some bales to more accurately assess stocks
- Book any straw you wish to purchase as soon as possible
- Keep straw clean and dry to reduce the amount needed over winter. If you don't have storage on farm, check whether the grower can store it
- Source underused rough grazing on arable or upland units to extend the grazing season for breeding stock
- Early harvest could allow establishment of brassicas or catch crops to extend the grazing season, depending on soil type and moisture levels. Look for opportunities to work with an arable farmer who could benefit from a consequential boost to soil health
- Investigate local availability of alternative products, but first check with the purchaser of your stock to make sure it doesn't affect marketing opportunities such as farm assurance, or waste regulation issues

- Consider culling more animals from your breeding herd or flock this year. Focus on selling animals with low production, poor fertility or health issues, or those that are out of the farm's calving pattern

For feeding

- Allocate the best straw for feeding, usually baled dry, mould-free and stored indoors
- All cereal straws are suitable for feeding if clean and mould-free but also consider alternative forage sources such as pea haulm or hay
- Consider selling stock early to prioritise feed stocks to the breeding herd
- Consider feeding cattle that are nearly ready for slaughter at grass, to reduce the amount of time required to be finished inside
- In beef herds, pregnancy diagnose early and cull empty cows
- For finishing stock, maximise growth rates to reduce time on farm
- Consider grouping stock according to nutritional requirements to reduce waste
- Ensure rations are balanced to take account of the nutrient composition of feeds and forages as well as the available stocks of the ration components
- Check feed troughs to ensure they are clean and that feed is fresh, minimising wastage
- Calculate the value of the production response to feeding additional concentrates to reduce forage requirements. In the case of beef cattle, often supplementary feed is cost-effective because, despite increasing feed cost per day, it reduces cost per kg gain and time on farm

- If ad-lib feeding is normally practiced, but rations dictate a specific amount to be fed per head per day, consider providing additional feed spaces, rings or bunkers to ensure each animal is receiving the correct diet
- Treating the straw with ammonia can increase its feed value and reduce wastage from a feeder
- For beef cattle, consider using the outer layer of bales stored outside for bedding, provided it is free from mould, rather than contaminating feed trough contents
- Avoid feeding any forage including straw that shows any signs of mould as this indicates there could be mycotoxin contamination

For bedding

- Ensure no water ingress to bedded areas from leaking or overflowing water troughs, guttering, downpipes and roofs
- Good ventilation will not only promote healthy stock but will help to remove damp air and keep the bedding as dry as possible
- Be aware that wet silages and feeds such as potatoes can cause wet dung. Including drier feeds and straw in the ration will produce dung of a more solid consistency
- To keep the straw drier, consider using courser materials such as oilseed rape straw or sand to provide a drainage layer below straw bedding. Note: Always check what agrochemicals have been used on any oilseed rape crops destined for bedding or feeding, as restrictions apply in some cases
- Regularly scrape the area in front of the feed passage or around a feeding area to reduce bedding use. If possible, put a small step between the feeding/loafing area and the straw-bedded area to help retain the straw
- Muck out sheds regularly
- Distribute bedding material little and often, ideally daily, with a thin, well-spread layer. Reduce the daily amount of straw as long as stock remain clean
- Prioritise bedding straw for calving pens, calf hutches, calf creep areas and cattle approaching slaughter
- Avoid overstocking of pens, taking account of increasing liveweights as cattle grow
- Minimise mixing of animals to reduce aggressive behaviour churning up the bedded area
- If there is a stubble field on the farm, or one designated for reseeding, delay ploughing and use to reduce the housed period with feeding outside
- Consider making available any paddocks accessible to the sheds as run-out or loafing areas, with consideration of the risk to soil structure

Further information

Feeding

Feeding suckler cows and calves for Better Returns

Straw-based diets for dry suckler cows

Feeding growing and finishing cattle for Better Returns

Mycotoxin contamination in animal feed and forages

Feeding the ewe

Improving ewe nutrition for Better Returns

All grass wintering of sheep

Using brassicas for Better Returns

Forage stocks and feed planning

Bedding

The bedding materials directory

Better cattle housing design

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