

# OPTIONS TO RESTORE FORAGE STOCKS

**Early season reports from the Field Options grass mixture trials at Harper Adam University provide a good indication of the impact of the dry spring.**

Data collected across a variety of plots during April and May reveal an average dry matter production shortfall of 37% compared with forecast, which points to probable future forage shortages despite the improved growing conditions in June.

What is also very evident from the trials is the variation in performance between different mixtures.

According to Field Options agronomist Rhys Owen, the trials site data – backed up by what's being seen on farms – means there are some important decisions to be made in the coming months on future forage cropping.



*Field Options agronomist Rhys Owen.*

“Whenever there is pressure on forage supplies, as we expect there to be as a result of the exceptionally dry conditions in the spring, it is all the more important to think hard about your cropping options, to ensure you make the most of the potential,” says Rhys. “It’s not just about what you grow, but also making sure you establish crops in their optimum window and into the best possible seedbed conditions. There will be less room for error in the coming

months because there will inevitably be a knock-on effect from the earlier production shortfalls.”

Most important, in terms of establishment, is to minimise any loss of moisture from the seedbed. Where soil structure is good, it is better to avoid cultivations if possible.

“Spraying off the previous crop and direct drilling often proves to be an effective method, not least because it helps to conserve soil moisture,” he says. “It also helps to reduce that initial establishment cost.

## **Extended autumn grazing**

The advice from Field Options is to focus mainly on establishing above ground forage crops for cattle, to extend the grazing season and reduce demand on silage stocks. Catch crop ryegrass is a good short term prospect, where July drilling offers significant dry matter availability as early as mid-September, and with the right variety selection can offer longer term benefits.

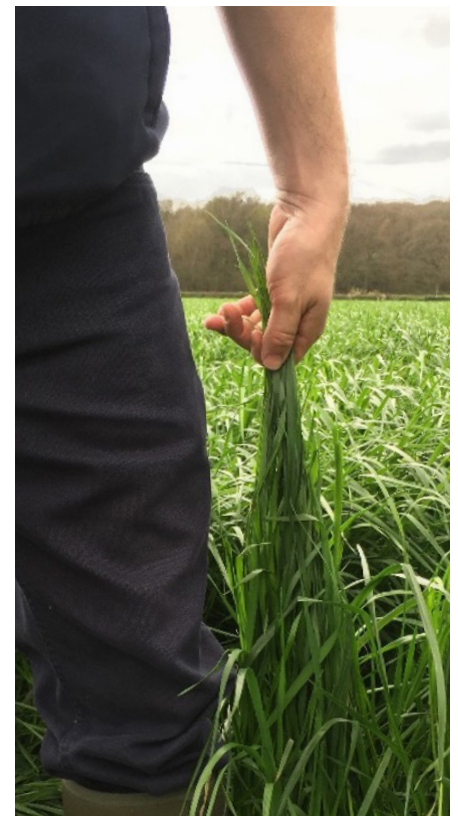
The Field Options Hurricane III mixture, which includes the most persistent Italian ryegrass and Westerwold varieties, has performed particularly well in the trials at Harper Adams University,” adds Rhys. “This mixture yielded 5.1 tonnes of dry matter per hectare by the end of May, which was 1.2 tonnes of dry matter more than the trial average (or an extra 4.8 tonnes/ha of 25% DM silage). Hurricane Pro-Nitro, which includes red clover, did even better, recording 6.1 tonnes of dry matter per hectare – that’s 8.8 tonnes/ha more 25% DM silage than the trial average.

“To put these figures into perspective, we estimate that an extra 0.5 tonnes of dry matter per hectare can equate to between £250 and £275/ha in terms of dairy output. Using proven formulations, with trial data behind them, is a sure way to build greater resilience into

forage production systems.”

Other cropping options that will provide additional grazing this autumn include forage rape, which can be sown up until mid-August and produce 4 to 6 tonnes of dry matter per hectare with a main utilisation period from November to January. Forage radish or mustard, which can also be drilled in August, require around 60 days until they can be grazed, but in the case of mustard can out-yield late sown rape. They do, however, need to be grazed off before they flower, which in the case of mustard should be before the end of November and for forage radish by the end of the year.

“Another August establishment option that offers autumn grazing and either early season grazing, or a silage cut, is our Clampsaver mixture, containing Italian ryegrass, rape and clover,” adds Rhys. “It can be block or strip grazed in about 60 days and, provided it is back-fenced and managed appropriately, will offer a good early bite in the spring. The rape and clover will die out after the second grazing, but the Italian ryegrass is capable of production through the following season.”



*Field Options' Hurricane III mixture comprising persistent Italian ryegrass and Westerwolds varieties has been one of the top performers in the HAU grass mixtures trials.*

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*Combining Italian ryegrass, forage rape and clover, the Clampsaver mixture can be sown in August to provide late season grazing and the potential for an early bite in the spring.*

## **Early turnout**

Just as extending the grazing in the autumn will take the pressure off silage clamps, so will an earlier turnout, and there are good options to achieve this.

Drilled in August or early September, Italian ryegrass mixtures have the

potential to bring forward turnout dates or provide a bumper first cut. Field Options have a mixture suitable for August drilling called Whirlwind, which includes fast growing berseem clover alongside specifically selected Italian ryegrasses. This can offer later autumn

grazing as well as spring grazing or an early first cut.

Once into September, the best option for a short term forage boost will be rye, but it will again be important to use varieties fit for purpose.

“It’s possible to establish a good crop of forage rye up until the end of September in many areas, provided seedbed conditions are good and there is sufficient soil moisture,” says Rhys. “However, the real value will come from proven varieties of forage rye, and certainly not from grain rye. By using the right varieties of forage rye, you really can see an uplift in early spring production, with as much as an extra tonne of dry matter per hectare by the end of March when compared with Italian ryegrass, for example.”

With growing conditions far better in the summer months than have been the case in the spring, opportunities are there to fill any forage gaps. Firstly, maximise the potential by ensuring seedbed conditions are right – particularly in terms of soil moisture – and then drill proven varieties at their optimum time. The scope is there to shorten the winter significantly and that will be the best way to reduce the impact of reduced tonnages of conserved forage in clamps this winter.



*Rye is a good option for September establishment, but it is important to use proven forage varieties and not grain rye.*