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THE STRAUTMANN Verti-Mix 2002 SF Double put to the test as spectators look on as it uses the milling head to take a clean cut from the silage face Ref:RH020518070



THE MILLING head picking up maize silage to go into the feed mix Ref:RH020518064

By Zoë Wilson



Self-propelled feeder benefits cows and farmers

USING a self-propelled diet feeder to mix and feed-out rations for a herd has both economic and nutritional benefits all round, but how do the figures stack up?

There's no need for a telehandler and tractor, mixing time is quicker, saving on labour and fuel costs, and presenting cows with a more accurate and consistent total mixed ration (TMR) will ensure better cow health and performance.

That was the on-point message at a demonstration day for Strautmann's self-propelled diet feeders, held at Rerrick Park Farm, Dundrennan, Kirkcudbright, recently.

Independent nutritionist, Hefin Richards, outlined the importance of delivering consistent rations to the

herd, while Opico's James Woolway presented the economic benefits of adopting a self-propelled feeding system through its contract hire package.

Mr Richards said that between the nutritionist's formulation and what the cow actually eats, there are three key areas for error - the mixer, the operator, and the cow, eg sorting.

"Feeding cattle is a high value task. The person doing the feeding needs to be trained and to appreciate the importance of accurately following the TMR formulation," said Mr

Richards.

He cited time pressure, especially when collecting forages for the mixer, as one of the key factors behind inconsistent TMR mixes.

Mr Woolway explained that one of the benefits of using a self-propelled diet feeder was that it enabled the operator to easily collect exactly the right amount of feed ingredients and forages.

There was no need to shuttle several times between clamp face and feed mixer. Instead, the self-propelled machine is driven to the clamp face where the correct amount of forage can be collected by

the milling head and fed onto the loading elevator to enter the mixing tub, already well broken up, and mixed in.

He also explained how silage quality varied across a clamp face due to weather conditions at harvest. Dry matter contents can vary by as much as 10%, with consequent big differences in energy and fibre contents, and nutritional quality.

Later, attendees saw how the milling head of the self-propelled feeder reduced this variability, as silage is collected evenly from the top down to the bottom of the clamp. This mode of action

also reduces wastage at the clamp face.

The most obvious saving of a self-propelled diet feeder is that only one machine is needed instead of three - a telehandler, tractor and trailed feeder.

However, Mr Woolway explained there were also savings in mixing time, which impact on labour and fuel costs. And with no shuttling back and forth for loads, there is less distance covered, and reduced wear and tear on machinery and tyres.

The actual cost of mixing and feeding rations is rarely

calculated on farms and every farm situation will be different, Mr Woolway explained.

He said that a single site, 720-cow dairy herd stands to make a saving of around £19,000 per year by replacing its current system for a self-propelled diet feeder on the contract hire package - this effectively gives farmers a fixed cost for feeding over a three, four or five-year term.

This calculation took into account the capital costs of the tractor, trailed feeder and telescopic handler, and annual costs of servicing and depreciation. These costs

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are already covered by the monthly hire and service charge for the self-propelled feeder.

By switching to a self-propelled diet feeder, the time spent mixing, and feeding time, will fall from seven to five hours per day, and fuel usage will be almost halved. Also, through the reduction in time spent mixing and feeding out, around £10,000 could be saved in labour cost, he claimed.

Overall, the annual cost of the farm's current trailed system was around £97,000, and it was claimed that moving over to a self-propelled system would cost around £78,000 per year, as well as bringing the nutritional benefits of more accurate and consistent rations.

Mr Woolway emphasised that every farm is different. Another example calculated for a 400-cow herd had shown savings of around £3500 per year in machinery, fuel and labour costs.

Similarly, improvements in herd performance will vary from farm to farm, but higher dry matter intakes and increased yield of 0.97 litres per cow per day, had been seen following a five-day loan of the Strautmann self-propelled diet feeder, said Mr Woolway.

The benefits of self-propelled diet feeder were: quicker mixing time; reduced fuel usage; less labour time; reduced machinery and tyre wear; improved ration accuracy; improved feed consistency; better rumen health and cow performance and increased milk yield.

But what does the user think about the machine?

Stuart Campbell is the self-confessed 'feeding man' at Rerrick Park and he shared some of his views on the overall working of the machine, which he had been trialling for a week.

He said: "When we got the machine, I really wasn't sure about it at first. I thought it was alright to use, but I wasn't sure it was going to be all that different from our current system. But now I have used it a bit more, I will be sad to see it go."

In total, it took him eight minutes to load 4.5 tonnes of silage, hugely cutting down his operating hours. He also commended its design, which ensured the machine could reach all areas of the sheds at Rerrick.

He added: "It's been great for some of the awkward areas of the sheds and has been really easy to manoeuvre round corners, meaning that fodder is reaching all of the cows, which is obviously what we are looking to achieve each time."

In terms of the physical presentation of the TMR, Mr Campbell said there had been an improvement: "We have a lot more clumping through the feed with our current system, but this machine has had a lot less, and you really notice that when you lift the feed off the ground - you can see and feel the difference."

"I also think it generally

does a better job all-round of mixing the feed."

So would he consider investing in one, if he had the option? "I think the machine, overall, is great, and would certainly average a lot less hours overall, and it's a lot handier for me for everyday use - that's a definite."