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ACT NOW TO INCREASE SILAGE YIELDS, FARMERS ADVISED

Farmers should act now to increase second and third cut silage yields, according to Promar International consultant Tim Harper.

Research carried out through the Northwest Livestock Programme shows that over half of silage fields are potash deficient and this is reducing silage yields, warns Mr Harper.

"With first cut almost finished in many areas, now is the time to start thinking about whether potash is a limiting factor on your farm.

"Unless the field has been severely depleted, significant levels of additional potash are generally not required for first cut as the soil has weathered for about eight months since the crop was last cut. However, the soil samples taken recently indicate that even before first cut, potash soil indices on many farms were lower than needed to maximise production."

Mr Harper explains that even where potash soil indices at first cut are at index 2 - the target for potash - they can fall below target for second and third cuts without additional applications. Significant quantities of potash are used in silage production – as much as 230kg/ha for a typical two cut system – and this must be replaced to maintain yields.

"Reduced yields represent a significant cost to farm businesses. At a potash soil index of 0, ryegrass yields are reduced by up to 15% and this could be costing up to £75/ha in lost production," Mr Harper adds.

Slurry and FYM are readily-available sources of potash, and applying these when fields are shut up for second and third cuts offers a cost-effective way to increase potash soil indices. Typical cattle FYM, for example, contains 7.2kg/t of available potash and dairy slurry 3.15kg/t. At current prices this makes them worth £3.94/t and £1.73/t respectively for potash alone.

"The only way to find out whether your soil indices are limiting production is to sample soils. Investing in samples now may help increase silage yields this year and in future years," Mr Harper concludes.