

## IMPROVING FEED EFFICIENCY

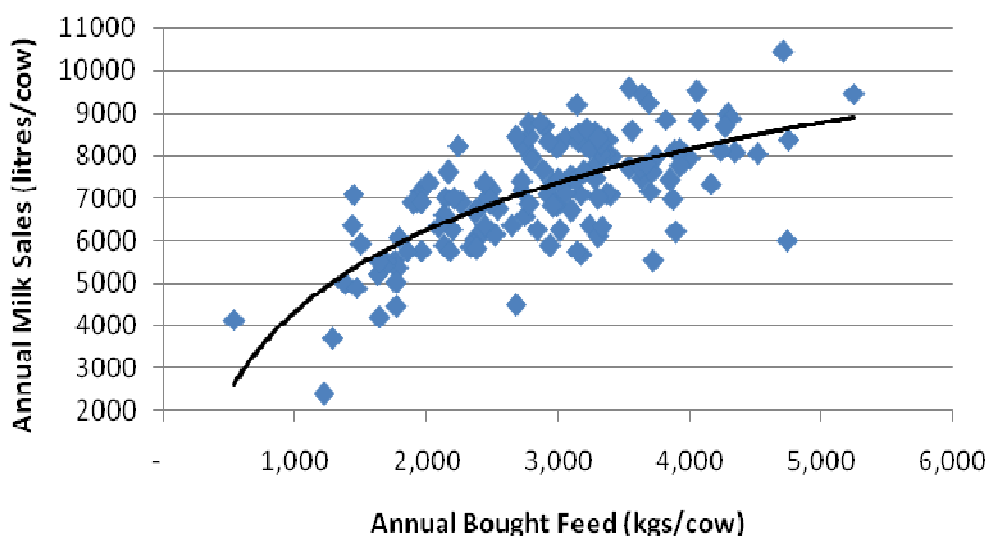
**Are you making the best use of purchased feeds? Promar International National Dairy Consultant Derek Gardner believes there is considerable scope for dairy farmers to improve feed efficiency as a way to reduce production costs.**

“Feed is the biggest single cost of GB dairying and so is a logical place to start if the aim is to bring down production costs per litre, and to make it more practical to live with volatile milk prices,” Mr Gardner explains. “This is not an excuse, however, to go out and try to argue £5 per tonne off the cost of feed or to reduce feed quality.”

“Over the last decade there has been a steady increase in feed rate per litre, largely a consequence of the effective removal of quota cost and a desire to increase production that has been bottled up for 25 years. Data would also suggest that for many farmers that extra yield has been produced expensively, based largely on extra purchased feed.”

The graph summarises the performance of dairy herds costed using Promar’s Farm Business Accounts service and looks at the relationship between milk output per cow and purchased feed use per cow. For this analysis, purchased bulk feeds have been converted to their concentrate equivalent.

### Milk Yield v Feed Use



As feed use increases so does milk yield, but the relationship is a curve, not a straight line. At the lower end of the curve the response is around 0.4kg/l which is the usually quoted response when purchased feeds are adding to the base diet. But at the top end of the curve the response is 1.6kg/l as additional feed is replacing the forage in the diet. This is clearly less economic.

According to Mr Gardner the most striking feature of the graph is the range in performance achieved at any given level of feed input. For example, farms feeding 3,000kg concentrates per cow, per annum produced anywhere from 6,000-9,000 litres per cow. At 24ppl, that’s a difference of £720 milk income for the same feed cost.

“Clearly some farms are using feed more efficiently than others and the benefits can be substantial. Many of the reasons will come down to ‘management’, including such areas as improved fertility, better cow health, genetic merit, cow comfort, water availability and, of course, forage quality and quantity which represents around 70% of the total annual diet for most.

“Another big area however is the attitude and approach taken to feeding cows and all farmers should periodically assess and challenge all aspects of how they feed cows.”

Mr Gardner believes many farmers could take some quick steps to improve feed efficiency and reduce feed costs per litre.

“Many customers have seen an increase in feed efficiency by looking at ways to ensure the feed gets to the cows that really need it. In some cases this has involved looking at grouping cows more effectively and adjusting the diet between groups. In other cases, the decision has been made to reduce the level of the base TMR ration and to feed more through the parlour. We are also seeing a revived interest in out of parlour feeders.

“It is amazing how often we find that it is physical factors that prevent cows from eating, but getting this right can have a significant impact on feed efficiency. Cows need at least 24” (60cm) of feed face to eat comfortably. Anything that makes it less easy for cows to eat will also reduce intakes so make sure they don’t have to reach too far for their food, look at ways to reduce the time cows are away from feed, and make sure feed is always available.”

Mr Gardner also advises taking care over ingredient choice. “It is important to make best use of expensive supplements as it is quite easy to inadvertently feed too much. If you are planning to add additional supplements to the TMR or blend, check what is already in the diet. It is not unusual for expensive additives to be in both the mixed ration and the dairy compound and all this does is increase feed costs. Make sure the actual response to any ingredient is rewarded by a higher milk income or cut out the cost.

“This analysis shows that there is considerable scope to improve feed efficiency and feed costs on a great many farms. This does not just mean cutting feed rate, rather getting more milk income for a similar cost. Improving feed efficiency can encompass a whole range of possibilities and will vary greatly from farm to farm,” Mr Gardner concludes.