

Silage problems solved once and for all

The Whitehurst family's accountant was one of the first to notice the financial impact of using Safesil – and that's because its benefits far out-weighed its cost!

Like most dairy producers, Michael and Richard Whitehurst are reliant on high quality forage to produce profitable milk, so when things go wrong with the silage, a big impression is made on the farm's bottom line.

This was exactly the situation on Manor Farm in Nobut, near Uttoxeter, Staffordshire, where the brothers had battled, year after year, to improve the quality of their grass silage.

"The silage looked perfect when you opened the clamp but by the time we got across the face it was already deteriorating," says Michael. "It was heating up, there were patches of mould and it was almost going black."

With a 120-head herd of pedigree Holsteins producing high component milk for Joseph Heler on a cheese contract, this was the sort of quality which could not be tolerated.

The worst of the silage had to be fed to youngstock, the milking herd's trough had to be emptied and routinely cleaned of rejected material and Michael estimates that over the course of the winter, around two to three weeks' worth of forage had to be thrown away.

The brothers knew they were using all the right techniques with their silage making – removing molehills to avoid soil contamination, cutting in the afternoon when sugars were high, wilting and then tedding after six to eight hours, and then consolidating thoroughly before securely sheeting at the clamp.

It was therefore a source of great frustration that the forage continued to let them down and although the company supplying their bacterial inoculant did their best to help, they were unable to arrive at any solutions.

So, it was with some trepidation that they approached Kelvin Cave Ltd, having



Michael Whitehurst (right) discusses silage quality with Kelvin Cave Ltd's area sales manager Bryn Thomas.

read an article which described someone having almost identical problems to their own, and seen the claims made for the silage preservative Safesil.

The brothers decided to take the plunge with Safesil in around 2010, having learnt that it had a completely different method of preservation from the products they had previously used.

Kelvin Cave's sales manager for the region, Bryn Thomas, explains: "Safesil contains the ingredients sodium benzoate and potassium sorbate, which will actually eliminate the activity of moulds, so we were confident that, if applied at the correct rate of 3 litres/tonne, the Whitehursts would not have problems at the clamp face."

The product also includes sodium nitrite which kills harmful bacteria; it helps achieve a rapid fermentation and can be relied upon to quickly and consistently stabilise the forage.

"The price scared me at the time but we also knew we were throwing away buckets of waste every week," says Michael. "And now we know the outcome we know it isn't expensive as it has paid for itself more than twice over in reduced vets' bills and lack of waste alone."

Michael refers to the reliably high quality of the grass silage he has made every year since Safesil was introduced and he attributes the reduction in vets' bills to less acidosis, fewer displaced abomasums and improved metabolic health.

"You only needed to look at it to see the quality was high," he says. "We knew it looked good – as did Ian Smith (see panel overleaf), our nutritionist – and the cows will always tell you when something is right. This smelt different, the texture was different, it was cold to the touch and it just ate better."

With higher intakes in evidence, the herd continues to perform well on its largely home-grown ration, currently with a 12-month rolling average of 8,762kg at 4.45% fat and 3.36% protein (305 days).

"Forage really is the mainstay of the farm, so we know if we get this right other things should follow," says Michael. "Our accountant certainly noticed the impact 12 months down the line and asked how we had made such a dent in our vet bills."



One season's use of Safesil was sufficient to convince the brothers the preservative should also be used on all of the 450-acre mixed arable farm's forages and they now use it whenever they grow maize and routinely on their wholecrop.

"We started using it on grass because that's where we were having the problems but once we saw the job it did, we used it the following year on wholecrop," he says. "This is always going to be a more difficult crop because of its high dry matter, and more fungal spores will come in from the field on a cereal crop."

Wet years are said to be particularly problematic for wholecrop, although the most difficult year was in 2013 when the brothers had the opposite problem.

"In that year our pea and barley wholecrop dry matter was 48% as we had had to drill in two halves a fortnight apart," explains Michael. "When it came to harvest, half was ready and half was too ripe so it was a difficult crop to ensile."

"However, whatever we have thrown at it, Safesil has done the job and this high dry matter wholecrop was perfectly preserved."

The icing on the cake has come with numerous competition wins and the farm now regularly features amongst the prizes for its wholecrop and its grass silage in the Staffordshire and Birmingham Agricultural Society's forage competitions.

But most of all, the family is happy with the impact Safesil has had on herd health and performance, and the farm's bottom line, and they always have complete confidence in the quality of forage they are making.

"If you are going to go to the expense of making silage, you might as well do it right, and I am now happy our silage is perfect right to the top of the clamp," says Michael. "Other products we have used in the past have not come close to Safesil - I will happily endorse anything that works."

"It's very easy to make a loss in dairy farming and the last 18 months have been extremely difficult," he continues. "We're only getting 27p/litre for our milk which certainly isn't enough but our accountant tells us we are still managing to make a profit."



Farmer Richard Whitehurst with part of the herd.

The nutritionist's view

Independent nutritionist, Ian Smith (pictured), compiles Manor Farm's rations and says his remit is to use straightforward, largely home-grown, feeds to cost-effectively produce high quality milk.

"I know what a tight ship the Whitehursts run and I have to do everything for this unit in a carefully costed way," he says. "High intakes of forage are essential in this endeavour, for which we need consistency, a lack of antinutritional factors such as moulds and high intake characteristics."

"In the past few years we have had all of this, although I am aware of the problems they had in the past."

"Michael and Richard are very good at making silage which they take at the right growth stage for a good nutritional value, but it's also important to present it in a consistent and highly palatable condition."

"They make up to three types of high quality forage and have cows which are well-bred and have the capacity for high intakes - all of which is behind this herd's good rumen health and outstanding milk quality."

"Great care is also taken to mix and present the ration well, and despite some old facilities - such as the old-fashioned trough with the tiled bottom - everything is well-considered with meticulous attention paid to detail."

"If forage isn't 100% here it definitely causes an issue but theirs has been consistently good for the past several years."

