

Meeting the wholecrop challenge

The challenges of wholecrop silage have been met with Safesil, which has bolstered performance and profits on Webbington Farm in Axbridge, Somerset.

Feeding high quality forage is a cornerstone of profitable beef production and for West Country farmer, Mark Amesbury, this means grass, wholecrop and maize silages have to be harvested and stored in peak condition.

Last season he believes the three forages performed better than ever before and he consistently achieved average liveweight gains of 1.1kg/day for his Angus and Hereford dairy cross beef reared on just forage plus 1kg/head/day of a high protein pellet.

So, as he turns his attention to foraging this season, he says he will replicate everything he did last year.

Selling the Angus cross dairy steers on contract to Dovecote Park (through agents, Farm Mark) and the Hereford/dairy crosses to Mitchells and Butlers (the largest operator of restaurants and pubs in the UK), he says his buyers are both discerning and exacting.

"Most people are aware of the high standards demanded by Dovecote Park on behalf of Waitrose but our Herefords are destined for the less well-known steakhouses, Miller and Carter," says Mark (pictured above right).

In fact, these steakhouses only sell 30-day aged and hand cut beef and have just been awarded 'England's best sirloin steak, 2015' in the Quality Standard Mark Excellence Awards hosted by EBLEX.

"Like Dovecote, what they require most of all is consistency and they insist on the beef having very specific requirements for age and shape and want a fat score of three or four and a deadweight of 280kg," he says.

This is achieved through the monthly assessment and weighing of each animal and maintaining the same high quality of ration throughout the year.

"This hasn't always been easy, and wholecrop in particular can be prone to spoilage, especially when the clamp is open and the sun is beating down," he says. "We have suffered from mould and heating at the face which can even be a problem in winter when we are feeding out slowly.

"So when David Warner from Kelvin Cave Ltd suggested we tried Safesil we



eventually decided to switch from the bacterial inoculant we had previously been using," he says.

"Safesil is a silage preservative which differs from other products on the market and we are always confident it will work if it's applied correctly and at the right rate, in even the most difficult situations," explains David. "It includes ingredients used in human food preservation including sodium nitrite which kills harmful bacteria, and sodium benzoate and potassium sorbate, which are the only commonly used preservatives proven to eliminate the activity of moulds without compromising fermentation."

It was around four years ago that Mark first tried the product and he says he has no intention of switching back.

"We just don't get any mould or heating and there's no waste at all when we pull the silage out," he says. "This year we went through the wholecrop very slowly but it smelt really sweet and clean all the way through."



In fact, he says he has had his wholecrop forage analysed by his feed company and found that a core sample taken in August 2014 was almost identical to a face sample taken in December.

"The sample taken from the face had a starch value of 28%, crude protein of 10%, metabolisable energy of 10.1MJ/kg DM and a pH of 4.5," he says. "This was almost identical to the earlier core sample and shows that it had not lost quality over time and after opening, but had been well preserved and had good intake characteristics."

Today Mark says the total mixed ration has performed so well that he is reluctant to change any of its components throughout the rearing process.

"In the past we have included barley for finishing in the last couple of months but this year we didn't bother," he says. "We just left the cattle on the same ration all the way through as they were doing so well on it and there didn't seem any point in messing around."

In fact he admits that even maize silage – also preserved with Safesil – has sometimes been surplus to requirements as the cattle have been finishing so quickly and so well without it.

Furthermore, he says he has increased the number of beef coming through the system, now finishing around 220 head, up from 190 in previous years, as feed wastage has become a thing of the past.

"It's almost annoying that Safesil has done so well," laughs Mark. "It's true it is the most expensive product in the company's range but I have no option but to buy it as I know it works so well!"

