

When *Farmers Guardian* went to visit Clive Gurney nine months ago, he was on a mission to be self-sufficient in terms of feed, getting as much milk as possible from grass. He is now much closer to that goal, despite increasing his herd by 100 cows, as **JOANNE PUGH** found out.

Grassland management advice helps increase forage intake and efficiency

IN mid-April Clive Gurney had rapidly growing grass everywhere he looked – so much so he was planning to take his first cut of silage this week.

He also has quality leys across the farm that will produce enough grass throughout the spring and summer to support his 300 pedigree Holsteins and make several cuts of silage.

This is a vast change from when Mr Gurney and his son, Andrew, first moved to Abbey Court Farm, Wigmore, north Herefordshire, nearly 10 years ago, and is partly because of their involvement in the Grassright group.

When *Farmers Guardian* visited Mr Gurney in July 2006, he had just volunteered to allow the group of grassland experts to meet on his farm to look at different ideas on best practice and technical efficiency.

The group of four companies has now met several times and created a long-term approach to grassland management at Abbey Court Farm, including reseeding and overseeding leys.

Mr Gurney can access a number of experts – Ian Mis-

selbrook and David Rhodes of Advanta for advice on seed; Vaughan Stansfield of Dow Agrosciences for weed management; Mike Denney of Kemira GrowHow for fertiliser use; and James Woolway of Opico for different types of machinery.

He has taken advantage of this, and increased forage intake is just one change he has made to improve the efficiency of his herd.

In addition, he has improved cow housing, concentrated on manure management and started vaccinating for BVD, Johnes, leptospirosis and IBR. The herd now also stands at 300 head, an increase of 100 milking cows since October 2005.

“We all have the same challenge and that’s survival,” said Mr Gurney. “We’ve found we’ve had to increase the number of cows to cope with overhead costs. We would have gone out of business otherwise.”

“We’re running fast just to stay still at the moment. But at least we’re still making money.”

The targets of growing 18 tonnes of DM per hectare of grass and being self sufficient

in feed remain, despite the increase in herd size. Mr Gurney said they were still growing ‘most’ of their own feed requirements and were currently achieving 13-14 tonnes DM – which is commendable when the national average is closer to eight tonnes DM.

He also said the driving force behind all the changes and targets was good management – getting bigger, but concentrating on the detail.

It has worked. Yields currently stand at 8,600 litres and are heading for 9,000; milk quality has been enhanced with protein and butterfat content increasing and SCC falling; and fertility has improved.

“Holsteins will produce a lot of milk on high dry matter intakes – that’s the beauty of the breed,” said Mr Gurney.

The herd is grazed for as long as possible, with turnout this year on March 16.

The 400-acre farm is split in half with 200 acres of grassland for strip grazing and 200 acres of arable rotation, including maize and wheat.

Of the grassland, three fields that have received particular attention from the Grassright group have thrived.

First was a field reseeded in spring 2006. This was grazed throughout last summer and silaged in early October due to the quantity of grass. It was grazed by sheep during the winter.

The field had previously been part of the arable rotation and weeds, particularly docks, were a big problem.

With the weeds now eliminated and the need for pesticides removed, the field was overseeded with clover this spring, using a tined grass harrow with an air seeder.

The field will be used for two cuts of silage – late May and mid June – and then grazed.

Mr Gurney said this field, one of two spring reseeds, was ‘superb’ and was what ‘kept them going’ through the summer.



The Grassright group - from left to right James Woolway (Opico), Vaughan Stansfield (Dow AgroSciences), Clive Gurney, Ian Misselbrook (Advanta), Mike Denney (Kemira GrowHow), Andrew Gurney and David Rhodes (Advanta).

He also said the general improvement in his grassland had meant he has spent £10,000 less on bought-in feed in 2006 compared to 2005, despite the dry summer and increase in cows.

The two other fields the Grassright group looked at were both autumn reseeds. The one, on a slight slope, had the drainage improved and was then sown after the wheat crop was harvested.

It was let for sheep over the winter and, Mr Gurney said, this covered the cost of ploughing and reseeding. He also said it was good to have a crop in over the winter to bind the soil together, particularly as the field was not flat.

“It’s a nice management technique in a cross compliance world,” he said.

This field was also overseeded with clover this spring and, again, will be used for two cuts of silage followed by grazing.

The third field was reseeded in autumn with a tetraploid mixture, as used across the farm, but was combined with an Italian ryegrass. This meant rapid early growth and, as it was too wet for cows to graze it early enough, the field will be cut for silage in the next week.

Weeds were a problem, as the ley had not been touched for 20 years before the reseed, and so docks and chickweed were treated in mid-March.

Mr Stansfield said this was possible as they were seedling weeds in an early ley – perennial weeds would have to wait until later in the year.

As the weeds have been controlled, the field will now be overseeded with clover, probably after second cut.

Overseeding with both clover and grass has been a technique that has worked well at Abbey Court Farm. Applying grass seed in this manner has

been particularly useful to repair flood-damaged areas.

An application of fertiliser was given to all the grassland in early March, as soon after T sum as the weather would allow. Mr Gurney used to apply straight N, believing P and K would be supplied by the slurry.

However, Mr Denney had suggested an NPK mix of 26:10:0, as access to phosphate is reduced at low temperatures.

Mr Gurney said he was impressed with the results and the grass was not stressed, despite a difficult time with high rainfall and frost.

The other purpose of the Grassright group is to look at alternatives for the farm. Mr Gurney said he was looking for an additional protein source and was considering a lupin-type silage.

However, the two Advanta representatives said undersowing maize with a grass and red clover mix could provide a better option. Mr Stansfield agreed it was a good crop and said managing weeds would be ‘difficult, but not surmountable’.

Mr Gurney and his son were very interested in this idea, especially as it would combat two areas of increased regulation – run-off from maize crops and fertiliser use.

However, they said they would need more land as the arable rotation is very tight and it would be impossible to take a field out of the rotation for two years to grow red clover silage on after the maize crop was harvested.

“It sounds superb,” said Mr Gurney. “We just need another chunk of land to widen our rotation.”



Clover, overseeded this spring, is just beginning to appear in the bottom of the ley.



Overseeding both grass and clover has worked well at Abbey Court Farm.

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