



We've identified options to reduce or make the best use of purchased straw this autumn, writes Robert Logan, Livestock Business Consultant at SAC Consulting:

### Buy well

- **Buy early** – the price tends to ease during the main harvest period, meaning even if it is still expensive, buying early will soften the blow.
- **Store straw well** – 15-20% of a soft centred bale can be in the last 4", meaning if it is very weathered, a large proportion of the bale will have a much reduced absorbency factor.
- **Alternative bedding** – not all alternatives have the same absorbency factor as straw but even rape-straw and wood chip can be a highly effective base layer in loose-housed sheds to encourage good drainage or act as a firm standing around water-troughs.
- **Buying in the bout** – livestock farmers must demonstrate the capacity to bale quickly (have the equipment or contractors' on-call). It is a big commitment but can work extremely well in securing local supplies at less haulage cost.

### Minimise waste

- **Scrape feed stance** – simply by having a step that minimises straw being dragged onto the feed stance and scraping this section, not bedded it can reduce straw usage by 30%.
- **Shed repairs** – this may seem obvious but busy schedules mean repairs can slip - check water troughs, repair/clean roof guttering, ensure outside water doesn't ingress. Where possible, also relocate water troughs so they are accessed from the feed passage. Yorkshire boarding, i.e. 2-rows of offset vertical boards, can be used on exposed shed sides to prevent rain getting in.
- **Improve ventilation** – creating a dryer atmosphere will use less bedding, and this will also improve livestock health.
- **Bedding systems** – bedding little but often practically may require a bedding machine but it will reduce overall straw usage. Similarly, rolling out a bale uses less straw than taking the nets off and allowing cattle to self-bed.

### Review rations

- **Dry diets for cattle on loose-bedded housing** – where practical and nutritional requirements are still met, target drier and higher fibre forage towards cattle in loose-housed sheds.
- **Ammonia treated straw** – this increases straws digestibility and has the added benefit of enriching it with nitrogen. Straw must be clean, free of green material and around 10-20% moisture to work well. It can reduce waste too, being in a more compact bale and the resulting dry forage can save bedding.
- **More intensive straw based diets** – whilst counterintuitive, heavier store cattle fed a forage-based ration in loose-housed systems, could be finished more intensively on straw and concentrate rations to reduce the time to finish.
- **Shorten the winter** – easy said, but as grass growth recovers, building a reserve of standing grass on a hill park, strip graze a catch crop or plant a Westerwold mix (or similar) for early spring grazing. Provided it doesn't cause damage to existing leys, gaining 2-weeks in autumn and spring will lead to a 15-20% shorter winter.

### Adapt the system

- **Only take productive cattle through the winter** – scanning breeding stock early, selling culls and/or a portion of trading stock or away-wintering cattle/sheep will significantly reduce demand.
- **Buy lighter cattle** – those who normally buy forward stores should consider some lighter cattle instead that can be stored more cheaply during the winter. Alternatively, buy fewer batches of heavier cattle thereby having less in the shed. However this option and the one above do require a budget to ensure it is economical and beneficial to cash flow over the whole winter.

These options can significantly reduce straw demand. Each option is as applicable this year as any other as straw becomes less available; it's just been brought into sharper focus this year.

### For more information

#### Advice line

For free telephone advice on a wide variety of topics including cross compliance, water framework directive requirements, climate change and other technical issues call us on 0300 323 0161 or email [advice@fas.scot](mailto:advice@fas.scot). The advice line operates between 9am and 5pm Monday to Friday.

#### Bespoke Advice and Grants

FAS can also help you to increase the profitability and sustainability of your farming business through Scottish Government grants including Integrated Land Management Plans (ILMPs) – worth up to £1,200. The ILMP will identify opportunities and cost savings for your business, based on an independent and confidential assessment of your business by an experienced farm business adviser of your choosing. As part of your plan you can choose to benefit from up to two further specialist advice plans.

#### Online

Our website contains articles, videos and much more at [www.fas.scot](http://www.fas.scot)