



Taking back control of the grass harvest

A switch to a shared forage wagon has put smiles back on the faces of two mixed organic farmers near Hawick in the Scottish Borders

James Manners of H & M Farms has done the silaging for Rob Parrish of DWA and NJ Parrish for a number of years. Most recently this was with a gang consisting of a trailed JF 1355 precision chop forage harvester loading up to three tractors and trailers, the clamp machine, and a rake up front.

This arrangement suited both parties whilst the chopper was running, although in the event of a breakdown it became frustrating and stressful.

The bed & breakfast pigs at H & M Farms introduced stones to the muck and eventually this meant that the chopper was hitting rocks when working.

Several things conspired to hasten the trailed chopper's exit, firstly when it broke down, the whole silaging gang were stood by awaiting the repair. Also, James' stockmen lent a hand when silaging, so their attention was off the stock during this period, which reduced the farms attention to detail.

James parted company with the trailed chopper in 2020. Meanwhile, Rob tried a contractor with a Pöttinger forage wagon, this proved to be a stress-free experience and worked well. Coincidentally, James demonstrated a Strautmann forage wagon in the same year and was very impressed with the chop length.

Neither party felt that they could justify



ABOVE
Rob Parrish (left)
and James Manners

the cost of a new wagon, so looked for a decent second-hand unit.

Rob found a relatively young Strautmann Giga-Vitesse CFS 4001 tandem-axle forage wagon at Forage Wagons South West.

Having checked out the machine via the UK importer, Opico, Rob discovered that it was an ex-airfield machine used solely for collecting grass clippings. The wagon arrived in time for first cut in June 2021 with 330 hours and 950 loads under its belt.

A light drinker

James pulls the Strautmann with a New Holland T7.290HD and he can run the machine in 1,000 rpm eco PTO on flat field. Rob runs a Case IH Puma 175 CVX and likewise has no power issue.

Both parties have used self-propelled foragers for wholecrop and noticed a considerable reduction in fuel use. The forage wagon is using less than 5litres/acre of diesel versus 10-12 litres/acre for the self-propelled. This comparison doesn't take account of the fuel used by tractors and trailers leading grass.

Although the output of the unit is down on the previous trailed forager gang, from 90 acres per day to around 60 acres, both partners felt that this was more than compensated for with the knowledge that they were going to go out and harvest grass reliably, without the breakdowns and all the staff tied up.

The flexibility of owning their own low cost, reliable forage system has not been lost on either party. Rob said: "Whilst in the past the contractor has been on an hourly rate, now I can cut fields further away without a significant cost penalty." Blocks of land outside of the traditionally close by meadows can now be economically harvested for both farms, and if grazing gets ahead of the livestock, they can grab it.

Both owners commented on the ease of use of the chopping knives in the wagon. With two banks of reversible knives, it's possible to swap knives four times without stopping to sharpen a single one. In practice it takes about 15 minutes to turn the knives.

Even with James Manners' 200 acre cut, providing both faces of each knife have been sharpened before starting work, there is no need to stop and sharpen any knives.

The need for quality forage

In a world of raised cereal prices, grass silage remains the most cost-effective ways to feed livestock. With the stakes in making good forage being up, running their own reliable, low labour input silage operation gives the control needed.

In a catchy season, both parties would have been reliant on their contractor. With the wagon, they can go whenever the weather allows.

Now that there is only one tractor tied up with the forage wagon, it has released other staff to pay attention to their regular farm work.

Whilst the quest to move away from the trailed forager was driven by the need for a reliable grass harvest, in practice, both James Manners and Rob Parrish have settled on a machine and an approach that has baked in more flexibility to their systems.

Not only is the forage wagon central to a low-cost silage approach, but it also allows them to make better quality silage, at the right time and grab grass when weather allows, without being in the hands (or queue) of a contractor. 🐾