

Murdoch & Co - Grazer GT160

In brief:

- 180 Holsteins averaging 8,200 litres
- Costs reduced by £28,000 in 6 months
- Concentrate use reduced by 75 tonnes, saving £15,000
- Fertiliser use reduced by £8,000
- Silage requirement reduced, which will reduce contractor cost by about £5,000
- Sward improved with more clover appearing

By changing to all-year housing and zero grazing, not only have dairy farmer's James Murdoch & Co considerably improved their grass utilisation, but just as importantly their costs in six months have been reduced by at least £28,000, with potentially higher savings possible this year.

Last year, having turned out their 180-cow Holstein herd in mid June onto a grazing platform of about 40ha, due to the wet conditions the cows were back inside on July 19th and having been considering zero grazing for the previous 18 months, Colin Murdoch decided to go ahead and buy a Grass Tech GT160 zero grazer.

"The most immediate effect of changing to zero grazing is that in addition to a longer grazing season, the area needed is reduced," says Colin. "Instead of 40ha, with zero grazing we only needed 32ha. This was cut on a 30 day rotation but hopefully we can tighten that a little. It also enabled us to make better use of slurry, as no fertiliser was applied after first cut. Instead slurry was initially injected at 28,000 litres a hectare and after that spread at 22,400 litres a hectare."

"Overall, this has saved us about £8,000 in fertiliser cost. And this year, because we will require less silage, most of which can come from first cut silage, this will save a further £5,000 in contractor cost."

However, one of the biggest savings that the Murdoch's have seen is in concentrate usage, which Colin says in the 6 months they were zero grazing last year was reduced by 75 tonnes, so saving around £15,000.

"Overall, I reckon that we will be saving in the region of 7 pence per litre and I now wish that we had gone ahead with it sooner," he says. "I had been considering zero grazing for a while because Holsteins don't like grazing. They are designed to eat grass and plenty of it but seem to be far happier if the grass is brought to them. Their overall condition is better and conception rates have been great since we



Colin Murdoch

changed and all the cows have pedometers, so hopefully it should be easier to see when they are on heat."

Farming at Kilmairs near Kilmarnock, the herd averages 8,200 litres and while fed a TMR mix during the winter, previously would graze from May through to September, weather permitting, and be buffer fed haylage with an 18% cake in the parlour.

Under the new system, this year the cows will be housed all year round, but may be offered a loafing area should the Murdoch's go ahead with a planned organic conversion. Having started zero grazing in March the cows will just be fed fresh grass through until October, when silage will be brought back into the ration until zero grazing finishes in November.

"Having changed to zero grazing and by also not using artificial fertiliser, it is noticeable how the sward has improved and how much clover is now appearing. Because the grass is improved, the cows in turn are performing better and this has benefitted butterfat levels which have risen from 4% to 4.4%," says Colin.

"Changing to zero grazing will make us focus more on the yield of grass per acre and how we can maximise that. We already work on a 7 year rotation and use a mix of early and late perennials to spread maturity and avoid everything being ready at once. But if we go organic then we may reduce that to about 5 years and then bring in legumes or pulses."

When it came to choosing which zero grazer to buy, having looked at a number of different makes, Colin says he opted for the Grass Tech Grazer because of its simplicity and build. "It's simple, well made and the support from Grass Technology has been fantastic. I was put off the other European machines because they just did not seem strong enough for our conditions. Everything is hydraulically driven and works off the tractor, so there is very little to go wrong."

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