

ROSEMARY *Collingborn*



Rosemary Collingborn and her husband Joe farm a closed herd of 100 pedigree Friesian type cows, 60 youngstock and breed bulls for sale. She has served on the MDC Council, Veterinary Products Committee, the RSPCA Council and was WFU dairy chairwoman.

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Historically, in this valley where farms have heavy clay soils, turnout day was May 8. This year, our cows went out on January 6, and not by mistake, as we had a subtle plan.

Ideally we would love a February turnout, but recent years have been wet in February, with many of our fields under water. This suits our grandsons, who like to go rafting, somewhat better than it suits the cows. This January we had dry fields full of nice green grass and it seemed logical to turn the cows out before the floods.

The first morning had the herd galloping enthusiastically round the field and then straight back into the yard, with not a blade of grass passing their lips. However, they soon learned to graze for two hours before taking themselves back to the yard for their afternoon ration. They seem to have an inbuilt clock, staying out a little longer each day, but then going back as a cohesive group into the yard, where silage, fodder beet, maize and brewers grains are waiting in round feeders.

There was even enough grass to use our plate meter and make a grass wedge. In a moment of rare efficiency, we even had the grass sampled. The dry matter was 20.3% and the ME 11.2, with

protein high and sugars low. Admittedly, this did hit our butterfat, but on the other hand we have just had the best milk recording we have ever had. We knew this early turnout would not last forever, and today we have no visible grass as it is under several feet of snow. It is just as well our cows are easy going and adaptable.

Behaviour

It is easier studying cow behaviour now as we have had cameras fitted, with the monitor in the kitchen above the Rayburn. After a few days watching the new monitor and its focus on the cow yard, I bought an extra round feeder as I thought the cows looked a bit squashed. New technology does have its uses. I have now been banned from making comments, which is a shame, as I can sit down and take a break from the housework and see what is happening with the cows.

As I watch them scratching themselves against the top of the round feeders, I cannot help but think they would really appreciate a brush.

We knew we were going to be short of feed this winter as we had to open our clamp so early, and the late grass growth was not there. One thing we bought for the first time to eke out the rations was fodder beet. This was my idea. We were going to feed it whole, as a chopper was expensive, but at first the cows just used it as a football. It took over 10 days and a lot of muttering from Joe and Steve before they would eat it. At my suggestion, we gave some to the bull. Confined to the bull pen meant he has all day to learn to eat it, and, even better, the cows could watch him doing it. That worked and the cows are now loving it.

The fodder beet has probably helped them put on condition, as they are blooming now, after looking a little on the thin side in November.

We had a school visit last week, and it is so much nicer looking round the farm with local primary school children than the Farm Assurance Inspector.



Monitor showing live picture of the cows.