

Can one machine be more financially viable than three?

# All-in-one feeding revolution

After a prolonged winter, with many herds fed TMR rations well into April, machinery has been put well and truly through it's paces during the past six months. Could it be time for an upgrade?

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A self-propelled feeder wagon would, without doubt, have made life a little easier for some producers during the past few months. And, contrary to popular belief, just such a piece of kit could be financially viable for many producers – reducing feeding time and costs, as well as improving ration consistency and accuracy, and reducing feed waste. So says Opico's James Woolway. His company has just held a series of farm open days to showcase the Strautmann self-propelled feeders that it now supplies to UK producers.

"Like a lot of new tech, producers worry about reliability and cost. The question they usually ask is 'what if it goes wrong at 4.30 in the morning'? I think we have both bases covered now," he says. "Reliability is good because that's what producers need and expect. We also offer a service package. If a machine is serviced regularly then potential breakdowns should be avoided – just like any machine or vehicle."

## Capital outlay

A self-propelled machine requires a similar capital outlay to a more conventional tractor/loader/mixerwagon combination. "As dairy units have expanded and continue to grow, livestock and feed storage may be some distance apart. Some loaders and tractors are travelling great distances to fill mixer wagons and feed cows and young stock. This all takes time and fuel and that also needs to be considered," he says. Labour – or rather the shortage of it – could be the clincher for many producers. "It's certainly not just about herd size. Using a self-propelled feeder will speed up feeding – some producers are saving two hours a day. That's time that can be spent on other areas of husbandry and the dairy business."

He says that herds larger than 350 cows should certainly give a self-propelled feeder serious consideration. "Unless your system and set up is already fantastically organised, it's likely that opting for a self-propelled machine could stack up." Sussex-based producer Matt Ford bought his first self-propelled diet feeder in 2003 and he's not looked back since. His interest was sparked when he saw a machine in action during a trip to Europe. "I saw how easily it did everything – filling, weighing, mixing, transporting and feeding out – without the need for several different pieces of kit. "I came home and did some sums, and the figures stacked up – helped by the fact

that we feed 1,000 head of cattle each day. It's a big job, so investing in some big kit to do it was easier to justify – particularly when you consider the other nutritional, feed efficiency and cost-saving benefits," he says.

Matt recently replaced his feeder, which mixes and delivers the ration for the unit's 600 milkers and 400 followers, and this time he bought a tub mixing model with an integral straw chopper.

"Straw is ground by the mixer, so that's one less machine we need on farm. Without it we'd need a straw chopper and it would be yet another job to do when adding ingredients to the mixer." His current model is a four-year-old Sgariboldi. "For us, the machine simply has to do what we need it to do." Four-wheel steering is a must: "Particularly when feeding our young stock because space is a little tighter in their housing. We can get in and out easily and there's also a reversing camera on the model we have now."

Matt also insisted on a hardened mixing tub this time: "So that it didn't wear too quickly. We are feeding a lot of cattle here, compared to some dairy units."

## Reducing waste

Matt likes the accuracy of feeding, which not only helps to eliminate feed waste – particularly at the silage clamp face – but also ensures that a consistent ration, both in terms of nutritional value and particle size, is put in front of the cows. "Reducing waste saves money and optimises feed costs and efficiency. And a consistent ration is good for the rumen. A balanced pH increases feed conversion efficiency, but also avoids any digestive upset or 'stress' that can have an impact on milk yield, cow health and fertility." Reliability is also obviously important. Matt says, like any machine, there are breakdowns. "And that's the only downside. If this kit breaks then it's a big problem. If a tractor pulling a mixer wagon breaks down, you can hitch up another tractor."

Michael Smith, who farms near Haverford West in Pembrokeshire, has used a self-propelled machine to mix and feed a TMR to his 420 milkers and 300 young stock since December 2017. And for him the decision to switch from a tractor-driven wagon was very much about the machinery. "We were changing our telehandler and tractor every three years. When you take a step back you can see that it's taking three pieces of kit to do one job.



James Woolway: "If a machine is serviced regularly, breakdowns should be avoided"

"The tractor was hitched to the feeder wagon pretty much all year round. And the telehandler's work life was also dominated by feeding. A tractor, feeder wagon and telehandler require a similar outlay to a self-propelled machine that does it all."

Michael then looked at accuracy. "We were feeding a ration that was within 1% of what it was on paper – precision was good. And we wanted to maintain that and reduce waste."

The self-propelled machine he was looking at – a Trioliet – has a block-cutter on a telescopic boom at the front that takes silage direct from the silage clamp face. "It just takes what's needed and, if it does take too much, it puts it back. And it can reach high up too, so it doesn't create an over hand – which is not only wasteful but could also be dangerous." Since making the switch feeding time has fallen by an hour to just two hours and 10 minutes: "And that includes young stock on another farm, which is 1.5 miles away."

## Fuel efficiency

Michael's also pleased with fuel efficiency. "Our self-propelled feeder uses 12.5 litres of diesel per hour. A tractor/feeder wagon set up would use between 18 and 20 litres per hour. Over 10,000 hours – which is the expected life span of such a machine – that's a fuel cost saving of around £50,000." He says that he's happy with the ration too. "It's consistent – just as precise as the one we were feeding through the mixer wagon. The whole TMR is ready in a few rotations – not 20 – so it's more efficient. There's less wear and tear on the machine and the ration isn't over mixed." An added bonus is what he describes as an immaculate silage face. "That's always a pleasure to see – we know that there's minimal waste." |