

“It looks simple on paper”



Dutch dairy farmer Wilbert Bertens has recently started combining outdoor grazing with robot milking. We take a look back at a first season marked by feed management worries but with significant time and labour savings. Text: Marjolein van Woerkom

Wilbert Bertens brought his 150 dairy cows in at the beginning of November. Only his dry cows and young cattle remained outdoors. It was quite a relief to the dairy farmer at the end of this trial year: “It was the first time I'd put my cows outdoors for 10 years – the combination of outdoor grazing and robot milking has led to major changes for my farm.” His cows had no problem finding the robot; it was mostly feed management that Mr Bertens found difficult. “I know exactly what the cows are eating when they are inside. I give them a ration of one third grass silage and two thirds maize silage, supplemented by potato pulp and alfalfa.”

At the beginning he carried on feeding them in the cowshed in the morning before they went out. “I was so used to doing that as I have done it for years. But they were full when they went outside and spent the whole day lying down chewing the cud,” he explains. “They hardly ate any fresh grass. Now I do it differently – I feed them when they come into the cowshed in the evening, and that means they go out hungry in the mornings.”

Figuring it out

However, calculating feed quantities remains difficult. “I just don't know exactly how much they eat during the day. I could give them too much extra feed when they come in in the evening, and feed will still be left by the feed fence the following morning,” says Mr Bertens. “It also makes a difference whether they go out in the morning to a fresh meadow or to a more stripped meadow. I have to measure out the feed accordingly. It takes a while to figure it all out. It seems easy on paper, but it's a different story in practice.”

Mr Bertens also saw a change in his yields. His milk production dropped by 1.5kg a cow per day at the beginning of the grazing season last year. “You feel it in your wallet straight away. From almost no extra feed at the beginning of the season, I have now started extra feeding to boost production. I was feeding each cow 10kg extra per day towards the end.”

His grasslands, in rotation with crops – especially potatoes – are reseeded every five years. The aim is to maintain a high grass yield. But another variable compensates this drop in production: The breeder receives an outdoor grazing premium from his milk factory. “In 2015, the premium was one cent/l; it will be 1.5 cents in 2017. That does not seem like much, but if you produce 1.4m kg of milk a year, it makes a big difference. You really need it because it demands a great deal of work.”



Not back to the milking parlour

Growth and innovation have always been the underlying principles of the Bertens family farm. Wilbert and his father invested in a milking robot back in 2006. “I like to keep up with modernisation and I expect it to deliver a great improvement to my working methods.”

The arrival of the robot meant that Mr Bertens had to confine his cows. “At the time, we had 80 cows to milk and that was a struggle with only one robot. Although we have always been outdoor grazers, we decided then to keep the milking cows indoors, although dry cows and young cattle continued to graze.”

A second robot arrived in 2008 and a third in 2016, this time for 150 dairy cows – which meant that the herd could be put out to pasture again.

And Mr Bertens is not planning to go back to the milking parlour. “Production has risen from 8400l to 9300l since we've been using the robot,” he says. “The cows are now milked 2.8 times/day. I can use my time more flexibly. In addition, my fertiliser usage has gone right down, from 2500m³/ha to just 1500m³/ha. That makes a difference in money terms, too. Naturally a robot is more expensive per kilogram of milk produced and the number of cows is less flexible, but despite the difference in cost, I don't want to go back to the milking parlour.”

He also thinks that his cows are healthier since he has put them back outdoors – and the image of agriculture provided by his production system is an argument in favour of his approach. “Consumers want cows that graze outdoors. It paints the sector in a more positive light. I'm happy to be able to play my part in that.”

Grazing in the Netherlands

In 2016, a large number of dairy farms in the Netherlands reintroduced outdoor grazing. This new trend can be explained by the grazing premium paid by milk factories. When farmers put their animals outdoors to graze for at least 120 days/year, 6 hrs/day, they receive an extra 2 cents/l from the CONO Kaasmakers co-operative and 1.5 cents from Friesland Campina.

This pricing policy reflects a rise in demand for products bearing the *Weidezuivel* (“Meadow Milk”) logo, introduced in 2007. Supermarkets specifically ask for it, and “meadow” dairy products are gradually taking over the shelves. To support this new trend, in 2007 the Dutch dairy profession, the government and Rabobank set up the *Stichting Weidegang*, or “Grazing Foundation”.

“Much knowledge about outdoor grazing has been lost here, both by farmers and cows,” says the General Secretary of the Foundation, Kees-Jaap Hin. “You cannot just open the cowshed door and hope that things will go back to the way they were before. Farmers have to learn how to manage their grass and cows have to learn how to graze again. Skill and knowledge are essential.”

Support is being provided by “meadow coaches” for farmers, with discussion groups and opportunities to visit different farms to see how this approach works in practice.