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Novel competition delivers hard data on turnip yield

A novel competition created by Ballance Agri-Nutrients has provided some northern King Country dairy farmers with their first real analysis of the value of their turnip crop yields.

Otorohanga-based Ballance Technical Sales Representative Matt Holwill devised the inaugural competition involving 40 farms, and now has his sights set on covering some of the Waikato region as well next season.

'Dairy farmers throughout New Zealand have traditionally grown turnips through the spring to use as supplementary grazing in the drier summer months and into the autumn, but never really knew what they were getting for their dollar,' explains Matt.

'This competition was science based, and we were able to calculate the yield in dry matter per hectare terms. Each entrant was encouraged to follow the best practice guide Ballance has developed.'

Winning farmer Sam Williams planted 2.75 kg/ha of treated Barkant turnip seed in the first week of November and his best section generated the equivalent of 13.7 tonnes of dry matter per hectare, with his whole crop averaging out at 11.5 t/DM/ha.

'The yield is a bonus,' Sam said after learning he had won the first prize of a tonne of DAP (diammonium phosphate). 'Pasture renewal was our main objective. Although we have been measuring our crops in the past this is the first time we have sent any away for analysis.'

'We have been planting turnips for several years and resowing into pasture. Last year we got to 10 April before the turnips ran out. It's tricky, because with variable moisture we can't plant after 15 November and there is a 60-day minimum before grazing, but we don't need the crop before late January.'

To calculate the dry matter yield, Matt roped off 6 sq m that best represented the whole crop at each farm and harvested the crop within, recording 60-90 kgs fresh weight. Each sample was then sent to a laboratory where the water content was removed to provide the dry matter calculation.

Sam has taken over management from his dad Owen of Te Rere Farm at Tihiroa, a 120 ha (effective) easy hill country dairy farm, part of a total farm area of 232 ha, and is on track for 120,000 kg milk solids this year.

Sam's crop was direct drilled and he applied 200 kg/ha of n-rich urea as a side dressing. He says the N-response was clearly evident. Runner-up Ulrich Hofer is also not a fan of cultivation, having direct drilled his turnips himself for the past five years.

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This increases the need for slug control, but has proved to be a simple exercise overall, says Ulrich.

'Turnips are cheap and easy to grow, with low harvesting cost and no wastage. It fits nicely into our system, filling up the gaps in summer.

'This competition gave me data on what we actually grew, and I can compare this with more expensive drilling processes. I find the simple way works just as well. Pay attention to detail, watch the weather forecast, and get into action with weed spray and so on.

'Matt has taken away the guessing – we never knew how much we were getting. This is a good benchmark, and it wasn't hard work for us to be part of the competition. It tells me I am not doing too much wrong.'

Ulrich farms 140 Friesians on light ash soil with some river flats at Mangaorongo Rd on the outskirts of Otorohanga. His 50 ha farm generates about 60,000 kg MS/yr. His turnip dry matter yield came out at 12 t/ha, winning him a tonne of n-rich urea. Third prize of half a tonne of n-rich urea went to Lindsay Meredith, who farms at Whawharua.

Matt says the practice of growing turnips as part of a pasture renewal programme or simply for supplementary feed is now widespread.

'There are a number of options available when growing turnips. To get the most out of the crop you need to do the right thing at the right time. Ballance has prepared a checklist to help guide farmers through this process, including getting the land back into pasture post cropping.'

He says none of the steps can be omitted without jeopardising the crop yield. For example, he says he had some crops in the competition return a zero yield because the slug bait round was skipped. Other sites were swamped by weeds because of inadequate weed spraying before planting.

'My Ballance farm rep colleagues all have access to this information, so just give them a call on 0800 222 090.'