Tips on tackling the dry season

The more silage and hay you make and store, the better it will be for your animals. Drought-tolerant feed sources like sorghum also come in handy in such periods

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The weatherman has warned that the coming months are going to be drier, consequently affecting farming. According to the Meteorological Department, the October to December season will have depressed rainfall driven by la nina conditions.

The warning is a call to crop and animal farmers to prepare. For livestock keepers, it cannot be gainsaid that dry spells are a great danger because most farmers depend on the rains to grow fodder.

A range of measures, however, would come in handy for you to manage the dry weather and emerge unscathed or at least reduce the effect. First, any obvious culled animals should go as soon as possible. This would give you control of your stock by reducing feed demand to allow for better nutrition of the productive cows.

Grass species and brachiaria are known to provide high quality fodder during dry seasons and surplus can always be conserved. Though drought is expected, soils normally have retained water capacity just before the onset. So broadcast grasses with nitrogen fertiliser to increase their response for greater dry matter yields. But this should be well-timed.

Silage making is another beneficial move. This is the time to harvest that high fodder plant like yellow maize for silage making. If making silage from maize crop, harvest the plants at dough stage. Then chop them into tiny pieces with a chaff cutter or a pulveriser. Further, sanitation and hygiene practices are also important. Some poisonous plants like lantana camara during dry spells remain green, therefore, attractive to animals. Farmers should, therefore, be careful on where their animal graze.

During the dry spell, parasites and infectious diseases are common. This is due to increased transmission in crowded conditions around water and feed sources. Poor nutrition associated with drought periods also make animals easily succumb to diseases as a result of low immunity.

Further, sanitation and hygiene is often compromised during the dry spell due to limited availability of water. Farmers, therefore, tend to clean the cowsheds and the animal beddings irregularly, exposing their animals to diseases.

Some of diseases to watch during the period include Foot and Mouth Disease and East Coast Fever caused by ticks. The parasite and infectious diseases are common in the urban and peri-urban areas being a favourite site. Monitor the animals as they may consume plastic bags and other unwanted materials leading to death.

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The more silage you make and store, the better. Drought-tolerant feed sources like sorghum fodder will also turn out to be beneficial for silage making. During dry spells, feeds like concentrates and conserved fodder like hay get scarce and become expensive. This means feeding all your animals to their satisfaction will be a challenge. The new calves are usually the first to suffer.

Extra feeds will be required for them and their soon-to-be born offspring. If not well-taken care of, they may lose body condition and produce less milk after calving down and compromise on reproductive efficiency.

Irrigation assists the establishment of fodder for continuity of production during dry periods. If resources allow you to irrigate, regularly monitor soil moisture levels to help develop a good working plan. Remember water will soon be scarce. Therefore, it is advisable to fully water the best part of your farm instead of poorly watering the whole farm.

Keep heat stress in mind. This occurs when heat load is greater than the animal’s capacity to lose it and consequently it alters their production.

Minimum measures can be employed during these times like providing access to clean drinking water at all times, keep the animals in good sheds, reduce walking distance and speed of the cows during grazing and handle the animals with care.

When preparing for extended dry periods, it is important to understand the importance of water management. Ensure that your stock has enough water as the demand will definitely increase. Existing farm water storage points should also be filled if possible.

Drought affected stock can consume large quantities of sand and dirt, poisonous plants or excessive amounts of indigestible materials leading to impaction in the gut. This is especially so for open grazing animals. During the dry period, the animals lurk everywhere in search of feeds with rubbish pits especially in the urban and peri-urban areas being a favourite site. Monitor the animals as they may consume plastic bags and other unwanted materials leading to death.

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