



# Forage considerations in a challenging season

*Grain sorghum could be an option instead of maize if irrigation is tight.*

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**The persistent dry conditions are continuing to put pressure on dairy fodder stocks. With winter coming to an end, the probability of receiving rainfall is increasing. Hopefully this holds true and there are planting opportunities for the warmer months ahead. The aim of spring planting is to maximise forage production from any rainfall during September and October and to capitalise on any stored soil moisture. Having a planting opportunity this spring will be very welcomed across all dairy regions.**

Crop selection this year may be limited due to the lack of available seed in the market place. Some forage and grain sorghums have already been fully allocated so securing seed early is necessary to avoid disappointment. If an unknown variety is available be sure to fully investigate its' application and suitability to your area. In addition to sorghums, millets and forage legumes such as lablab could be considered. Maize seed is in satisfactory supply for those that may be able to grow this crop. With regard to tropical pasture, if there is a spring rain event ensure to fertilise a sufficient area to promote increased quality dry matter. Tropical pastures are capable of exceeding growth rates of 100kg dry matter per day so it is important to make the most of this resource when the opportunity presents. Being ready to take advantage of a planting opportunity will be critical this season and being flexible around forage selection could be important.

In most regions there will be limited stored soil moisture available and crops will be fully reliant on rainfall. However, if there has been rainfall during the fallow there could be some moisture to assist with crop growth. Soil water may be estimated by assuming that 20% of rainfall during the fallow (assuming it is weed free) is stored as soil water - for example 20 mm of soil water will be stored from 100 mm of fallow rainfall.

For those fortunate to still have irrigation water available, it may be more important than ever to consider crop yields, water use and the risk associated with particular crops. If you are considering growing irrigated maize, as a general rule of thumb you need to be confident that you can apply a minimum of six megalitres of water (rainfall + irrigation) throughout the growing season, otherwise consider growing the more drought tolerant sorghum. If irrigation is available, matching the supply to the plant demand will result in optimising potential yields and quality. If resources are limited look after a smaller area well to achieve a better result.

Another consideration for spring planting is soil temperature. If it is too low, poor establishment and weak plants are often the resulting outcome. Maize and millet may be planted at slightly lower soil temperatures (12-14 degrees Celsius) than sorghum and summer legumes (15-16 degrees Celsius). Test soil temperature with a thermometer in the late afternoon by placing the probe at planting depth to gain accurate results.

Agronomic practices such as weed control and fertiliser programs are of very high priority this season. Having these factors addressed will assist with achieving optimum results when the season does break. Having an inventory of seed, sprays and fertiliser ready to go may be necessary. If there is a

widespread rain event in spring there will be a huge demand for inputs, so be prepared.

In addition to agronomy, conservation practices need to be refreshed to capitalise on any crop earmarked for silage or hay. Ensuring silage is chopped and processed correctly as well as being covered and sealed to exclude oxygen is really important to minimise waste and reduce overall dry matter costs.

The season is challenging, however there may be some opportunities to capitalise on rainfall in the coming months. If there is a break in early spring and the soil temperatures are still low, millet may be an option for some forage within 5-6 weeks over some of the possible planting area. As soil temperatures increase slightly, forage and grain sorghums come into the fold. Seed availability may dictate planting options for sorghum varieties. Be sure to check their applicability. Sorghum crops are considerably more drought tolerant than maize and may be the best option this season. Summer legumes are of very high quality, however, yields tend to be lower. Be sure to have total forage requirements covered before putting too much area into these crops this year. Focussing hard on getting all crop management practices right this season will be critical to ensuring maximum water use efficiency and yield is achieved.

