

STRATEGY Farmers keep small herds to maximise on profits and engage in paddock grazing to ensure all year supply of pasture

Pastoralists now get a lifeline through growing exotic grass

University trains livestock farmers how to regenerate indigenous grass, make hay and store fodder.

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In 2016 and 2017, a biting drought swept through the plains of Kajiado County and in its wake left massive losses to local farmers as thousands of their livestock died in droves.

One such farmer is Philip Mokinyo from the largely pastoral community which is known for keeping large herds of livestock.

Mr Mokinyo says as the drought ravaged the region, he and many others watched helplessly as thousands of animals dropped dead day by day.

"There were ghastly images of carcasses all over. Even wild animals died. There was no pasture anywhere and the land was bare due to overgrazing," recalls the farmer who lost close to 100 animals.

To cushion the remaining animals from imminent death, some farmers and their emaciated animals fled to Nairobi County and Ukambani while others crossed over to Tanzania in search of pasture. But even then, hundreds of animals continued to die on the way.

Curved out a piece

"It was total loss. Something never seen before," Mokinyo says.

Today, the farmer like many others from Loodokilani location in Kajiado County is much wiser. Thanks to a training programme offered by South Eastern Kenya University (Seku) which is based in Kitui County, the livestock farmers have been equipped with skills to regenerate indigenous grass as



Prof Mary Mburu of South Eastern Kenya University shows a variety of exotic grass at their nursery in Loodokilani location, Kajiado County. The university's School of Agriculture has been training livestock farmers in the county how to grow grass to ensure availability of pasture. [Philip Muasya, Standard]

well as grow new varieties of grass.

In addition, the university's school of agriculture has trained them on paddocking and how to make hay and store fodder for future use.

The end result is that there is enough fodder for the animals and farmers do not have to migrate in search of pasture.

In his 800 acre piece of land, Mokinyo has curved out a piece and divided it into four paddocks locally referred to as *Olopololi*. Each paddock is 50 acres. Here the farmer keeps 25 cows and 120 goats. Unlike in the past, he has also appreciated the idea of keeping a small herd to maximise on profits.

"In some paddocks, I have integrated the local grass with new varieties and they are doing well. I am never worried about pasture unlike before. This is a concept that has real-

Sh100

■ Farmers who grow new varieties of grass as well as re-introduce indigenous ones

70 per cent

■ Arid and semi arid areas where livestock are found in the country

Sh600

■ The cost of a bale of grass two years ago which has now dropped to Sh100

ly helped us and opened our eyes, I'm now planning to acquire few hybrid animals," an elated Mokinyo says as his son watches over the healthy animals.

He says that the animals

er pasture. During droughts, we would spend a lot of money buying feeds," Mr Loontasati states.

He dedicated one acre of his 300 acres to try the new grass varieties. To his pleasant surprise they did very well and the grass was instantly liked by the cattle. "I decided to cut and bale it for my animals' feed and for sale," he says.

Today, Loontasati is a staunch grass ambassador. He sells grass seeds to other farmers and trains them how to grow the new varieties as well as re-introduce the indigenous ones. For good yields, the farmers are advised to plant the grass at the onset of rains.

About 100 farmers from the locality have embraced the idea. This has also lowered the cost of the feeds. A bale of grass currently goes for Sh100 from Sh600 two years ago.

Prof Mary Mburu who teaches in the School of Agriculture at Seku and who has been involved in training the farmers says availability of grass is central to range-lands because 70 per cent of the country's livestock are in arid and semi arid areas.

"Our research and training is premised on the methods of producing and sustaining enough fodder for livestock in such areas. We have identified grass varieties that are of good nutritional value to animals," she Mburu says.

She explains that the farmers are trained on how to reintroduce local grasses once depleted and in addition grow new exotic varieties.

Mr Antony Mututua, a community social worker who has been training the farmers in conjunction with the university says migration of animals has reduced significantly, adding that the animals now fetch good prices.

spend three months in one paddock before he moves them to the next one. By the time he is at the final *Olopololi*, healthy mounds of grass have regenerated in the first one.

His wife Esther Tataiya says she has noted improved milk production saying the introduced exotic grass varieties are the animals' favourite.

"The animals are now healthy. We no longer have droughts," she says.

At first however, the idea of growing grass for animals sounded odd for the pastoral community. Some laughed it off. Judah Loontasati, another livestock farmer says he decided to give it a shot after witnessing tens of his animals decimated by drought.

"Before the university came in, we had no idea that one can grow grass. We believed it is God who grows grass and oth-