

Farming

Animal feed outcry set to end as NAGRC plants 12 square miles

The inadequate production and supply of good-quality animal feed is one of the major factors hindering the progress of the livestock sub-sector in Uganda. In many parts of the country, the continuing shortage of feed of sufficient quality means that animal products still contribute substantially little to the economy and also to local food needs. However, the recent intervention to utilize nine government ranches for planting 12 square miles of corn and soya bean will go a long way to stem the outcry. As **ERNEST JJINGO** writes, the large-scale production is a two-pronged strategy to boost food and animal feed security in the country.

At the 2022 Agricultural expo in Jinja in July, Bright Rwamirama, the state minister for Animal Industry, noted that the two most important aspects for one to succeed as a livestock farmer are quality genetics and nutrition. He said many farmers get disappointed after failing to hit their target and end up blaming secondary factors like bad weather, drug resistance and poor management.

Fast forward to October, government adopted an ambitious move by the ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF) to boost food and animal feed security in the country.

MAAIF approved the National Animal Genetics Resource Centre and Database (NAGRC&DB) for production of maize and soya bean on 12 square miles spread out across its farms and ranches. This is the first time government is embarking on such an aggressive programme.

During a recent media tour of the various farms, it was evident the programme offers encouraging signs that the country is on track for mass production of food.

According to Bright Rwamirama, the state minister for Animal Industry, the scope of work is divided into seven processes. "It involves bush-clearing, primary tillage, row planting, fertilizer application and weeding. Other processes include the application of pesticides and herbicides, harvesting as well as post-harvest handling," he said.

OVERVIEW

The first phase of the programme is projected to wind up on August, 2023 and is expected to yield at least 17,500 tonnes of feed, of which 16,000 will be



Maize farm at Ruhengyere field station

allocated to animal feed and the rest apportioned for seed.

The focal point of the programme is at Aswa ranch in Pader, where 1,320 acres of maize plus another 600 acres soya bean have already been planted. Big as it may seem, this is just a small fraction of Aswa's whopping 17,920 acres projected for full utilization.

According to the Aswa ranch manager, 4,480 acres have already been cleared for ploughing but blamed the excessive heavy rains derailing bush clearing and tillage operations.

"We hired machinery but they had to halt operations for weeks due to soggy and inoperable soil conditions," he said.

The situation is much better at Nshaara ranch where 90 per cent of the land has been utilized. Here, 2.8 of the allocated three square miles have already been planted with maize and soya bean but the manager decried the presence of fake agro-inputs on the market that have proven ineffective against pests and weeds, culminating in unbudgeted-for repeat applications.

Meanwhile, it is at Kasolwe stock farm that most of the post-harvest activities will take place. Kasolwe hosts the grain storage facility, storage warehouse containing the feed-processing equipment as well as a hay storage barn for silage storage.

According to Dr Peter Beine, the NAGRC&DB executive director, they plan to dry and store 3,000 tonnes of maize in the grain storage facilities at Kasolwe, which will be split into half for grain and manufacture of compounded animal feeds.

"We shall also use the Kasolwe animal feed production warehouse for drying and storage of 288 tonnes of soya bean and later use it to manufacture compounded animal feeds," he said.

Dr Beine also outlined plans to engage



Packaged corn silage

the farmers operating near the various government farms. "We are going to set aside 15,000 tonnes of maize yield to make corn silage and package it in laminated sacks for sale and dry season feeding at the farms and ranches," he said. "Of this, about 290,000 50kg bags are to be sold to farmers at a gate price of Shs 25,000 and we expect to get Shs 7.2bn. Our targeted beneficiaries of this arrangement are mainly farmers' groups under the Parish Development Model (PDM)."

LIMITATIONS

Whereas most farm managers decried the recent heavy rains and fake agro inputs for the disruption, there are several underlying factors that have made the programme far from rosy. There were several complaints of prohibitive costs of hiring machinery, especially for bush-clearing operations. Matters have not been helped by production delays occasioned by eviction of encroachers as machine operators had to maneuver around numerous plots of homesteads, gardens and graveyards.

The lack of irrigation equipment to

facilitate longer planting periods has led to unplanned expenditure, not to mention the large-scale infestation by the fall armyworms that have proven resistant to most of the available pesticides.

On the other hand, wild animals, especially elephants, buffaloes, zebras, baboons, monkeys and antelopes continue to feed on maize gardens in Nshaara, Sanga and Got Apwoy ranches that border Lake Mburo and Murchison Falls national parks.

MITIGATIONS

To lessen the extent of damage, NAGRC&DB is undertaking in mass sensitization of farming communities situated within and in the vicinity of the programme areas. "We are doing this through multiple community engagement meetings, barazas, radio talk shows and district council meetings and so far we have got a positive response," said Dr Beine.

He added that all agro-input suppliers have been instructed to provide viability certification to support provision of high-quality agro-inputs whereas mechanized pesticide application has been repeatedly undertaken and is ongoing at all the food and animal feed production sites.

On the other hand, NAGRC&DB has installed a solar-powered ground water irrigation system at Kasolwe to alleviate the prevailing water stress in the maize there. Meanwhile, whereas NAGRC&DB has fenced off all the gardens with chain link fencing materials, it is engaging Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) with the aim of establishing of a tougher lion-proof fence at the boundaries of Nshaara and Got Apwoy ranches to prevent wild animals from crossing into and destroying gardens.

FUTURE PLANS

Amidst all this, it is obvious the current facilities may not be able to handle the high volume of yields in the coming years and for this, NAGRC&DB plans to establish two 10,000-tonne grain storage facilities with attendant animal feed processing equipment at each of the participating nine farms and ranches to serve the different regions where they are situated.

Dr Johnson Nkuuhe, the NAGRC&DB board chair, said plan are underway to set up one high-capacity reinforced concrete silage bunker and pressurized farm water irrigation systems at each of the farms. "What is important is that we are awaiting some funding to ensure every process goes according to plan."

To stem the practice of hiring machinery at high costs, NAGRC&DB also intends to acquire its own high-value mechanized agricultural production support machinery and equipment.

Now that the programme is in full swing, it is important that government avails funds for irrigation, post-harvest and storage facilities to avoid any delays in the processes. It is also evident that NAGRC&DB's approach to hire machinery is taking a huge financial toll.

So, it is paramount for government to invest in animal feed processing plants on these ranches and farms to ensure that NAGRC&DB fulfils its role of providing breeding livestock for the success of the PDM.

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