

Report on the Grassland Science Pastures Information Day held at Cedara on 22 May 2007

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Introduction

The Pastures short course, run annually at Cedara by the Grassland Science sections of both South and North regions, has, in the past, been aimed at commercial farmers and extension officers. The course content has changed very little over the years and as a result the course has been attended mainly by extension officers and few farmers. It was therefore decided that the 2007 Pastures short course be replaced by an information day aimed specifically at small-scale and emerging farmers.

The theme of the information day was “Feeding your livestock all year round”. The objective was to inform small-scale / emerging farmers and extension officers about the basics of planning a fodder flow and the fodder options available to them. Five topics were presented in Zulu by staff from Grassland Science and the ARC-RFI. They included temperate pasture species; tropical pasture species; land preparation, pasture establishment

and fertilisation; fencing and irrigation; and fodder flow planning. The information day also included a static display of implements as well as Nguni goats, Nguni cattle and Merino sheep on pasture.

Presentations

Presentations were prepared by Grassland Science and ARC scientists and technicians.

The talk on land preparation and pasture establishment was presented by Doreen Ndlovu, a Grassland Science research technician at Cedara. In her talk, Doreen discussed the importance of soil sampling and demonstrated a few sampling methods. Land preparation was covered in detail, as a well-prepared land is essential to maximise yield and persistence of any crop or pasture. Doreen also explained the need for fertiliser in any intensive cropping system and how to use the Fertrec soils analysis report to make decisions regarding pasture-specific fertiliser requirements.

Solomon Mthethwa, a research

assistant at Cedara, gave farmers information on summer fodder for livestock using the various tropical pasture species that produce well in KwaZulu-Natal. He was assisted by John Cunningham, Grassland Science's recently-retired control technician who has an in-depth knowledge regarding pasture species suited to KwaZulu-Natal and their use in small-scale and commercial farming enterprises.

Feeding livestock during winter is a perennial problem and Noma Hlongwane from the ARC LBD Livestock Production Institute (based at Cedara) spoke on the options available to farmers wanting to plant temperate pastures to feed livestock from May through to September. She also mentioned alternatives, such as fodder radish and lucerne, which can be planted dryland and are therefore useful in areas without irrigation.

Raphael Mwandla is a research assistant in the Grassland Science section. He has a great deal of experience in the practical aspects of livestock management and therefore presented the talk on fencing and irrigation. He provided information as to the different types of fencing available, including electric fencing, and the importance of dividing a pasture into camps. Raphael also discussed irrigation equipment and how to ensure even application of irrigation to pastures to ensure uniform growth over the entire area.

The final talk on fodder flow planning was presented by William

Diko, the Grassland Science research technician at the Kokstad research station. This is an important aspect of any livestock production system and refers to a long-term plan that ensures livestock have sufficient food, of the right quality, all year round. William discussed the importance of a fodder flow and the factors to consider when planning a fodder flow. He also highlighted the need for a fodder bank to fall back on in times of food shortages.

Pastures manual

Currently there is very little or, in some cases, no written information available to Zulu-speaking farmers in their home language. The Department is starting to address this need (e.g. the Goatkeepers' Animal Health Care Manual, available in English, Afrikaans, Zulu and Xhosa) but the availability of basic information translated to Zulu is in short supply. The manual given to course participants on the Pastures short course is written in reasonably advanced English, with many scientific and technological terms. It is intended for commercial farmers and extension officers with an understanding of biological processes and a good grasp of the English language. The manual did not meet the needs of the farmers attending the information day and so a new manual was developed, with articles written in both English and Zulu. Each delegate attending the pas-

tures information day received a manual, which contained detailed information on the topics presented by each speaker. The contact details of Grassland Science staff were also included and delegates were encouraged to contact the section should they have any questions in the future.

Attendance

In spite of the bitter weather conditions, a total of 68 people attended, 41 of them (60%) non-departmental staff (farmers and livestock owners). Delegates came from all parts of KwaZulu-Natal, including Dundee, Stanger, Empangeni, Mandeni, Vryheid, Dannhauser, Ladysmith and Wartburg. Snowfalls prevented people living in the Kokstad area from attending.

The way forward

Feedback from the information day was very positive, with presenters being complimented on the type of information provided as well as the manner in which it was presented. Presenters reported that farmers appeared to feel comfortable asking questions in their home language and hence participated fully in the discussions. A post-mortem meeting revealed that:

- The information day should continue to be offered at least every second year, alternating with the formal pastures short course. Grassland Science may look at restructuring the

short course and perhaps presenting a basic and an advanced course to meet the needs of both emerging and commercial farmers.

- Presenting the topics in Zulu contributed to a large extent to the success of the day, and this should be continued.
- Presentations were located at two different sites on Cedara, which necessitated transporting delegates between sites. This created a few logistical challenges, which would be solved by having all presentations at one site.
- It has been suggested that Grassland Science produce a series of posterised modules on various aspects of pasture production. This would facilitate the flexibility of Grassland Science to hold pasture information days throughout the region.

William Diko (centre left) describing a Konnskilde



Photo: Nicky Findlay

