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Establishment of forage banks in Nevis

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(Poster Presentation Summary)

Livestock form an important part of the farming system in Nevis. Small farmers own up to 8 or 10 cattle, or up to 100 sheep and goats which are left to roam in scrub or rough pasture. The main livestock rearing areas tend to be in the drier south and east coastal zones where severe droughts of 3 to 4 months duration occur almost every year. Overgrazing by small stock has contributed to severe soil erosion in these areas.

CARDI in Nevis is working with farmers to encourage them to plant forage banks as a reserve for the dry season, and to conserve forage as silage. *Leucaena* and Guinea grass are used in the drier areas (about 1000 mm rainfall), while Elephant grass of both tall and dwarf types is being assessed along with Guinea grass in the areas with more rainfall (about 1250 mm). Siratro is seeded into both mixtures.

Establishment has been most successful using vegetative material of the grasses and direct seeding of soaked *Leucaena* seed. Siratro seed is broadcast by hand. *Leucaena* is grown in rows at 1m x 2m spacing, the grasses are planted in the space between the rows. Planting Guinea grass is the most labour intensive operation.

The impact of the forage bank on the livestock production system is being assessed by regular monitoring. Data is collected on labour input and costs of establishment, forage production from both grasses and legumes, the cutting interval for both species, and also growth rates of selected animals within the system. These are compared with growth rates of animals in the unimproved situation.

The results so far are encouraging. The mean cutting interval for Guinea grass has been 61 days, while for *Leucaena*, the first cut was at 7.5 months. The dry weight yield for Guinea grass has increased from 6380 kg per ha in January, to 9177 kg per ha in May. The first cut of *Leucaena*, which was mainly for pruning, produced 1579 kg per ha. Farmer acceptance has been high, and neighbouring farmers are now expressing interest in establishing their own forage banks.