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Study of cattle production performance under smallholder farms in the Pelwatte area in Moneragala district

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In addition to sugarcane cultivation dairying is becoming an important viable family industry in Pelwatte area, in the Monaragala District for many farmer families especially, with the involvement of women and children. Objective of this study was to collect baseline information on existing dairy cattle production systems in Pelwatte area through a household survey. Thirty five small holder farmers were randomly selected from ten settlement divisions and interviewed using a structured questionnaire. Data were gathered on feeding practices, milk production, constrains for production etc. Body condition score of animals were also estimated during rainy and dry periods. Mostly non-descriptive crossbred cattle were dominant in the area. The most common grass found was *Panicum maximum* (Guniea A). *Gliricidia sepium* was the most familiar tree legume fodder. Five percent of farmers practiced zero grazing, while 30% practiced partial grazing and 65% practiced fulltime grazing. Under partial grazing cows grazed maximum of 8 h during the day and they received cut herbage after grazing. Under fulltime grazing cows grazed minimum 11.5 h during the day and did not offer fodder after grazing. Only 8% of farmers offered concentrates and minerals to cattle and 35% of smallholder farmers offer tree fodder to their animals. Rice straw has been fed by 15% farmers, more to bulls than to cows. Sugarcane tops and other crop residues have been fed only by 8% of farmers especially in the dry season. The use of agro-industrial by-products (e.g. Molasses) was negligible. Milking was a female dominated activity (62.5%) compared to males (37.5%). The average milk yield was approximately 2 Ld^{-1} during the rainy season while the yields sharply decreased to around 0.25 Ld^{-1} during the dry spells. Animals started to loose body condition from June (1.4 ±0.42), the early dry season and by late dry season a sharp decease (1.0 ± 0) was observed. In the main rainy season, between October to November animals regained maximum body condition (3.3 ± 0.45 to 3.6± 0.22) due to availability of feed resources. Farmers only sold their milk as curd due to lack of marketing and storage facilities for raw milk production. Available excess forage production during the rainy season has not been put into optimum utilization due to lack of knowledge in conservation techniques. Indications are that the provision of low levels of appropriate supplements, and farmer awareness programmes especially on proper utilization and conservation of sugarcane tops and other byproducts and improve infrastructure facilities would boost production levels in these low input out put system of cattle management.

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