

## CASE STUDY



# Cutting tropical grasses for drought reserve silage

### Snapshot

**Producer:**

Luke Bowman (pictured)  
'Springfield', Barraba  
15 kms south of Barraba

**Area:** 1,600ha

Grazing property with  
temperate and tropical  
pastures



### Background

When rain finally fell after a prolonged period of drought, Luke Bowman found that he had an abundance of feed from his tropical grasses due to reduced numbers of livestock.

He decided to explore the option of utilising tropical pastures by cutting and storing them as silage to use as feed during future dry times. This can be an effective drought management strategy for livestock producers.

Previously, Luke had relied on cotton seed and hay to feed his stock, but the costs became too high and proved hard to source. The idea of building his own feed reserves from tropical grasses seemed a great opportunity to meet the challenges of ensuring a cost-effective way to provide good quality feed supplies in the future.

### What was involved

Two paddocks of tropical grasses were cut for silage using a disc conditioner mower and were baled and wrapped in plastic before storing on the property.

The first paddock of 16ha was cut and baled by a contractor and produced 100 (5 foot round) bales. Luke found that when the tropical grasses were cut, it was quite moist with some dew and rain around. He decided to leave the cut grasses for 48 hours, raking once in that period, before baling and wrapping. This proved to be an ideal timeframe given the conditions.

The second paddock was cut at an increased height level as Luke found that cutting closer to ground level caused issues with the machinery due to rock damage. Due to timing, the tropical grasses were cut when the plant was at

a later growth stage. Although the quantity of silage produced was high and the tropical grasses responded quicker afterwards for grazing, feed quality testing indicated that the feed value was reduced.

Luke stored the silage on his property after baling and wrapping in plastic. The first paddock was wrapped on site and then transported to the storage compound, but he found that wrapping them after transporting saw less damage to the bale covering.

Bales were wrapped six times, and Luke estimates that this should last three years before they need to be re-wrapped or alternative measures for storage such as burial may be considered.

## Benefits

Producing silage from your property during times when there is excess feed helps significantly in reducing costs and the pressures of accessing quality fodder during dry times.

Feed reserves allow the producer to manage stock through a dry period, taking the pressure off pastures and helping to maintain groundcover.

Most tropical grasses can produce a large bulk of feed during their growing season. However, this bulk quickly becomes fibrous with a low leaf: stem ratio and has lower nutritional value. Converting excess feed into silage at a vegetative growth stage, before quality deteriorates, improves the quality of feed for livestock.

It is worth sacrificing significant yield to produce silage of higher digestibility and nutrient levels for livestock by cutting at an early growth stage.

After cutting for silage, tropical grasses recover quickly and are able to be grazed soon after. Cutting helps keep the grasses in an early growth stage in the paddock and maximises the quality of the feed for grazing livestock.

## Summary

Tropical grasses can be an underutilised resource, particularly when livestock numbers have been reduced because of drought conditions. As a drought reserve they can be a cost-effective way of ensuring the availability of quality feed for livestock during dry times.

Ideally, tropicals should be cut for silage while at their prime. Timing is critical, and cutting tropical grasses in the initial growth phase is the key to maximising feed quality for livestock production.

## Further information

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## Key learning and advice

Feed quality tests indicate that when conserving silage it is best to cut early, ideally before stem elongation commences.

High quality feed can be produced, taking the pressure off standing dry matter in the paddock during dry times.

Be organised so that you can get the timing right and be able to strike at the most opportune time.

Cutting tropical grasses at a higher level is best to manage damage from rocks closer to ground level.

