Assessing feed gaps on smallholder livestock farms in Limpopo, South Africa: Production system and coping strategies

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BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVES
Climate-induced drought is a major issue especially for communal livestock keepers in the Southern African region. The frequent periods of drought in the Limpopo province, South Africa can be considered as extended feed gaps. Reducing the intensity and the frequency of feed gaps on smallholder farms can greatly improve livestock productivity and farm profitability. Therefore, it is important that interventions to alleviate feed gaps on smallholder farms take into account context-specific assessments of the variability of feed supply and the existing farmers’ coping strategies. We provide insights on the seasonality of feed gaps, understanding of the livestock feeding regime, and report current coping strategies.

RESULTS
The majority of the farmers (79%) asserted that the winter (June – August) is the period of feed unavailability in quantity and quality, followed by Spring (September – November). Farmers thought that feed is satisfactory throughout the rest of year, and that feed gap remains a regular phenomenon that translates into animal weight losses and deaths. As coping strategies livestock farmers may feed crop residues and or reduce herd size. Moreover, very constrained farmers may rely on the unproductive rangelands leading to animal losses.

MATERIALS & METHODS
The study was conducted in the Limpopo region, South Africa. The region is the poorest of the country and suffer frequent occurrences of drought. We used a semi-structured questionnaire among 90 livestock farmers across different locations in the Limpopo region.

CONCLUSION
Our study demonstrated that seasonality is key in understanding livestock feed gaps in the smallholder context. There is an urgent need to ease the pressure on the common feed resources among resource-constrained farmers. Though culturally difficult to accomplish, regulations that will target community-level adequate herd sizes might be ecologically vital as rangelands management. Feed gaps are not governed by biological factors, but also farmers’ socio-economic capacities. For instance, high sensitivity to feed gaps can also be reduced when financial opportunities are created for smallholder farmers who could purchase feed, supplements to improve and complement the quality and quantity of feed during feed gap periods.

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