



**Danger.** A tick-infested cow. The major cause of death of cows has been reported to be East Coast Fever (ECF) and babesiosis, which are tick-borne protozoa infections. NET PHOTO

# Ticks defy spray drugs, cost farmers millions

**Despair.** The government has yet to make any practical intervention a year after promising to deal with drug-resistant ticks that have ruined the fortunes of many farmers in the cattle corridor districts. **Moses Muwulya** captures the issues and fresh promises.

**H**erders in the cattle corridor to the west of Uganda have suffered losses following the outbreak of drug-resistant blue and red ticks that have ravaged their herds. Many animals have been reported dead as a result.

The major cause of death of cows has been reported to be east coast fever (ECF) and babesiosis, which are tick-borne protozoa infections.

Different farmers we spoke to for this article suspect that the acaricides they are sold to spray their cows are not genuine, and they blame the government for failing to protect them against profiteering businesspeople who aggressively market the "fake" drugs.

This, some farmers think, has contributed to the natural resistance of the parasites.

The government has also been blamed for only sluggishly responding to the problem with vaccination against east coast fever yet to be done, which prompted the Minister of Agriculture, Vincent Sempija, to lay the blame on the Ministry of Finance.

#### The damage

Mr Gorge Kikele, a herder in Mabale, Sembabule District, one of the many who have suffered the misfortunes caused by drug re-

sistant ticks, says the situation is increasingly discouraging to rear exotic cattle breeds.

"In just six months I have lost about 100 heifers to east coast fever. This means millions of money," a distraught Mr Kikele says.

Mr Kikele, who also doubles as the Sembabule cattle keepers' association secretary, adds that he has also lost a lot of money indirectly on buying acaricides: nearly every type on the market that has been recommended.

"So that is double loss. You lose the animal and the money (for buying acaricides). I am even resenting these cross breeds because they are less immune to diseases compared to the native Ankole cattle," Mr Kikele says.

Mr Moses Ninsiima, another livestock farmer and cattle trader in Sembabule, has a similar story. He says besides losing cattle, he has suffered a significant decline in milk production. This, he says, sees him earn less from milk.

Mr Ninsiima notes that these parasitic ticks have seen their livestock weigh less, which he says lowers the cattle sale price.

"Cows are priced according to weight, mostly those for beef. This has seen prices going down due to less weight. A cow that went for Shs 900, 000 now goes at Shs 450,000 -600,000," Mr Ninsiima says.

In Kiruhura, the worst hit district with loss of about 3000 cows in the last six months, Mr Paul Eriya Kyamanyanga, a renowned farmer in Kayonza parish, Kikasti Sub County, says he has in the last four years lost 200 Friesian cows to east coast fever and babesiosis caused by red and blue ticks.

"I have a dip tank and we always bring a

## 3000

NUMBER OF CATTLE LOST IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS IN KIRUHURA DISTRICT, THE WORST HIT.

veterinary doctor to mix the acaricides and water used in the dip tanks. You cannot say that the problem is on misuse," Mr Kanyamanga says.

Like the rest of the farmers, Mr Kanyamanga believes that the acaricides on the market are fake and that their continued use makes the ticks resistant.

"We have 70 percent tick resistance acaricides on the market, and such drugs should be withdrawn to stop death of cattle," Mr Kanyamanga opines.

What hurts these farmers is that government doesn't show commitment to deal with the dealers who have continued to see farmers lose money over fake drugs.

#### Indirect costs

In March this year, while commissioning tractors for pasture improvement project that were distributed to dairy farmers at the National Agriculture and Research Organization (NARO) Mbarara Station, President Museveni said the problem of ticks has persisted and there was a need to address the issue of

fake drugs.

"Some of the drugs for both crops and animals are fake. They were adulterated because of business interests. Dealing in drugs should not be a 'business' for everyone," The president said then.

Drug resistant ticks have not only affected farmers alone. This is because cattle markets remain a financial spine in most of the cattle corridor districts. The local revenue for such districts heavily relies on cattle markets duty.

In a district like Kiruhura, 80 percent of local revenue comes from livestock market duty and cattle movement permits.

Sembabule's monthly revenue collection status report shows that between January and June, livestock markets contributed Shs 225,142,000, nearly half of the Shs 478, 662,120 revenue collections in the district.

But asked if the setbacks in livestock farming have affected local revenue collection, Mr Ronald Katende, the Sembabule District revenue officer, notes that there is apparently no direct impact.

He, however, says, "In the long run if there are no counter measures to this problem, local revenue will definitely be affected."

Mr Katende adds: "Many farmers are now reluctant to have cross breed cattle because of their low resistance to ticks as opposed to the indigenous cattle. This in the long run will have a negative impact on milk production."

#### Delayed vaccination

Following the severity of drug resistant ticks in June last year, the government promised to vaccinate all the cattle to arrest the problem. This has not happened a year later.

The resolution followed reports from laboratory tests in Kampala, where samples of ticks were taken and proved that ticks had developed resistance to drugs, as Ms Joy Kabasti, the state Minister for Animal husbandry revealed then.

She also noted that they had observed a complexity of reasons that accounted for tick resistance to drugs. Among these, she said, was wrong dosage and poor mixing of acaricides. Cases of fake acaricide as noted by farmers, was also observed.





**Under attack.** A man drives his herd to a grazing ground in Ntuusi, Sembabule District. cattle in this area have been hit by drug-resistant ticks. Below, a farmer sprays his cow in Lugusulu, Sembabule District. PHOTOS BY MOSES MUYILYA

## A LOT AT STAKE

Livestock production is an integral part of the agricultural system in many parts of the country, playing diverse roles in the livelihoods and economies of people. The estimated current livestock population is 14 million cattle, 15 million goats, about 4 million sheep.

Its contribution to the Gross Domestic Product and Agricultural Domestic Product, is 4.4 and 18 percent respectively.



## East coast fever

**E**ast coast fever is a tick borne protozoan infection of cattle in East and Central Africa.

It is transmitted by infected ticks. These ticks normally attach to the ear, hence often known as brown ear ticks.

It is one of the major disease constraints to cattle development and well known by farmers.

Its control is feasible through tick control where frequent dipping of cattle in acaricides and this

has been the method relied on by farmers but ever since the ticks developed resistance to drugs, the disease has now become uncontrollable.

The situation now calls for vaccination of animals against east coast fever, such that they develop immunity towards the infection.

Experts consider vaccination as an effective remedy but note that some animals may react to the vaccines and cause clinical disease but these are treated as they appear.



problems.

Thus on top of vaccination and spraying, Ms Kabatsi said the farmers were also going to be sensitized on proper use of drugs, although the farmers insist that they know how to mix drugs and have been doing it for such a long time.

To this effect, Shs 10 billion was earmarked to carry out the vaccination, which the farmers impatiently waited for since ticks had posed a serious threat to their source of livelihood.

However, the said program, which had to start in December last year, never started. It was pushed to January this year on grounds that the ministry had not received the needed funds.

Ms Kabatsi also explained that the acaricides which government had ordered had by that time not been delivered in the country since they had been ferried by ship.

However, in January, the story was not different. Vaccination did not start as earlier promised by the minister. Ms Kabatsi said the setback was due to delayed arrival of acaricides.

The campaign was then pushed to early April, with regrets from Ms Kabatsi since the problem had now spread to the entire 16 district of the western cattle corridor.

But the said vaccination that was to start with the worst hit Kiruhura District and later roll out in the entire corridor still did not kick off in April.

She explained that her ministry had not received the funds from the ministry of Finance to conduct the vaccination, but that the acaricides were readily available.

Mr Vincent Ssempiija, the minister of Agriculture, also faulted the ministry of Finance, which he said has delayed to release the required funds for the exercise. "I wanted spraying to be rolled out at once in the entire cattle corridor without starting with Kiruhura since farmers have longed for it. But I don't manage finance," Mr Ssempiija told Daily Monitor in a telephone interview recently.

He added: "We are still pushing for funds from the Ministry of Finance. We need to keep in touch with the finance

exercise in July this year."

## Farmers' faith shattered

The delays to vaccinate cattle against east coast fever, according to Mr Ninsima, the chairperson Sembabule cattle keepers association, have left farmers hopeless. He is pessimistic that even in July vaccination will not kick off.

"This is now the third time when government extends the program, first it was December, to January, April and now July," Mr Ninsima told daily Monitor in an interview recently.

Ms Sheila Mwine Kabaije, citing what she called 'outright refusal' by the ministry of agriculture to address the problem, petitioned Parliament to require the minister of Agriculture to explain the inaction.

In her letter, Ms Kabaije noted that in 2016, the Tenth Parliament approved some emergency funds for the procurement of certain acaricides.

"The honorable minister promised and gave steps of action. Among them was zoning and vaccination of cattle. To date nothing has been done," her letter says. The letter further noted that the problem had been compounded by the recent outbreak of foot and mouth disease.

This, she said, has greatly affected the people's livelihood and wanted the ministry to be called to explain the prevalence of drug resistant ticks in the area.

When Ms Kabatsi, the state Minister for Animal husbandry, showed up to brief Parliament last week, the news was worse than before. Ticks resistance to drugs, she said, had been officially confirmed in up to 27 districts in central, Western and south western districts.

"The ministry is collaborating with Cuba Government to explore the development of a vaccine our indigenous ticks. Cuba itself has managed to reduce chemical use against ticks by over 80 percent through use of anti-tick vaccines," Ms Kabatsi's statement to Parliament says.

She said the ministry is implementing a single spine extension system and has stepped up recruitment of technical staff at the sub county level, which is expected to improve management of ticks and tick borne diseases. She said the government will step up the regulations of acaricides supply chain and improve monitoring of their use on the farm.

Ms Kabatsi also said a draft policy on control of ticks, which has been submitted and is yet to be considered by the cabinet, recommended a review of the 1964 Animal Diseases Act to update legislation on control of ticks and related diseases.

## Experts speak out

A senior agricultural officer in Sembabule District, who asked not to be named for this article, said in the past farmers never faced the challenge of drug-resistant ticks.

He said the system of zoning which was used by the Ministry of Agriculture in the past helped a lot in this regard.

"Farmers in Northern Uganda used a specific type of acaricides for a given time. Those in Western and Central Uganda also used a different brand. The regions could rotate these brands, but this ceased to happen following economic liberalization," he said.

He said zoning, which Ms Kabatsi said will be resumed soon, is likely to be difficult to implement, arguing that many traders in different places already imported acaricides, which will be hard for the government to seize or control.

He suggests that the government should ensure that the country imports high quality acaricides by being restrictive on the drugs that enter in the country.

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