

# DRYNESS IN GRASS- LAND – HOW FARMS IN EUROPE ARE RESPONDING

Whether it is the “Parndorf Plain” in Austria, the fen in Brandenburg or the Atlantic coast in France – cattle farms everywhere are affected by increasingly long periods of drought. Four farmers from Europe report on how they are adapting their livestock, crop rotations, and forage harvests in order to produce high-quality forage despite heat, irregular rainfall distribution and narrow harvest windows.



» **Feed does not grow by itself – especially not in temperatures of 30 degrees in the shade. «**

Vinzenz Harbich

## 2 **Management, mixture, trees**

The Harbich organic farm is located north-east of Vienna, in the middle of a typical vegetable-growing area – livestock farming is the exception here. Vinzenz Harbich has made a conscious decision to focus on this. With 90 suckler cows, he farms 200 hectares organically – on dry, sandy soils with an increasingly Mediterranean climate. 100 hectares of this are extensive nature conservation areas used purely for grazing. The remaining 100 hectares are arable land on which Harbich practises a carefully planned crop rotation with root crops and cereals.

Each crop rotation ends with triticale, in which a site-adapted herb-clover-grass mixture is undersown in spring. After the triticale harvest, the arable land is grazed in a rotational system.

Because summer heat and heavy rain put a strain on crops, the right mixture is crucial: fodder chicory, ribwort plantain, cocksfoot and timothy grass are key components that are included in DSV COUNTRY Energy MultiLife mixtures, among others, and increase energy and animal health. Sainfoin and alfalfa is added to the mixture. „The mixture not only has to grow, it also has to suit our cows – they select preferably chicory, for example.“

To improve climate stability, Harbich has structured parts of his arable land with agroforestry – including irrigation. Almond trees provide shade, reduce wind and help to retain water and use it more efficiently. His goal: feed security through diversity – and arable grass management that delivers yields even in hot summers.

## 1 **The first cut counts**

In western France, close to La Rochelle, David Paillat runs his conventional dairy farm, SCEA Paillat, with around 130 dairy cows and offspring. Milk yield is 10,500 litres per cow per year – the basic feed yield is 6,000 litres per cow per year. The Deux-Sèvres region is considered to have low rainfall, with increasingly unreliable weather.

„Between July and September, there is often no rain at all,“ says Paillat. As a result, grazing is becoming increasingly difficult.

Paillat has responded to this – not with a major overhaul, but with many targeted adjustments. The grazing period has been significantly reduced. Only the cows in the dry period and older heifers graze on the pasture for a short time in the summer. Instead, Paillat uses silage.

The first cut is made early: „We try to harvest as much as possible before June – after that, hardly anything grows.“ Paillat works with species-rich mixtures of clover, Perennial and Italian ryegrass, sainfoin



» **Water is only available in winter, so we try to make the best of it before it gets too hot. «**

David Paillat

and tall fescue, which are added adapted to the site.

“We do not have a magic formula. We do our best to get most out of spring and ensure silage quality.” says Paillat. His goal: stability in the basic feed before the drought hits.



#### 4 Yield in the fen – despite drought

Harm Tinge runs his farm 50 km south of Berlin. It includes a young cattle breeding operation with around 700 animals and 700 hectares of agricultural land. Of this, 300 hectares of grassland on fen soils are used intensively for organic farming. The farmer has learned to use the special characteristics of the soil and climate change to his advantage.

For this purpose, he has adapted his grassland stocks to the climate: Among others, he uses the COUNTRY G 2471 Organic mixture. He appreciates that it contains red clover because it copes well with dry conditions even on the fen. Due to the longer pre-wilting period, the harvesting process was adjusted and chopping took place later. Tinge also recommends soft-leaved tall fescue, which delivers good quality despite difficult conditions – the key here is to hit the narrow harvesting window exactly. „The quality declines if the areas are harvested too late due to poor accessibility,“ he explains.

„This year, the first cut had a crude protein content of 190 g/kg DM,“ says Tinge. His motivation is to keep the grassland healthy and maintain this high feed quality, and to increase it even further in the future. Harrowing, rolling, reseeding, and liming are all part of his standard programme. Because „the grassland has to be maintained in order to be successful,“ emphasises the farmer. He has also adapted his fleet of vehicles, the cutting height and the cutting time. Since he started using a forage trailer, there are fewer tracks on the fields and lower crude ash content in the feed.

» One should always be ready to change and adapt in order to be successful in grassland farming despite drought and in demanding sites «

Harm Tinge



#### 3 Grass with a system – even under extreme conditions

Here, water comes only from above, if at all. The „Parndorf Plain“ in northern Burgenland is one of the driest regions in Austria. Nevertheless, Georg Prantl is one of the few farmers here who raises ruminants organically. The Austrian has consciously chosen a form of agriculture that does not necessarily focus on growth in terms of area, but rather on optimised use. His approach is based on sound knowledge and individual decisions that are tailored to the site and the opportunities it offers.

During the summer, Prantl’s cattle and sheep graze on extensive nature conservation areas. Clovergrass is grown on almost a third of his arable land for winter feeding. It is also used as additional grazing area in dry years. The clovergrass mixture is sown as an undersown crop in winter cereals using a disc seeder.

Depending on the site, COUNTRY field grass mixtures 2058 or 2050 are added to the un-

dersown crop, for example. The tall-growing cereals protect the clover from strong sunlight and wind, especially in the early stages. „Establishing clover grass as an undersown crop – that is our recipe for success,“ emphasises Prantl. The clover grass crop then remains in place for an average of three years, depending on its performance. „When planning crop rotation, we don not follow any standard procedure, but make decisions based on the site, our experience and the results of regular monitoring through soil and plant analyses,“ explains Prantl.

To extend the grazing season and provide winter feed, Prantl uses site-adapted „Winter Bale Grazing“. Silage bales are spread over the grassland as a precautionary measure, and the feeding area is moved daily – including soil conservation. The ruminants, Aubrac cattle and Jura sheep, live in the system all year round and follow the rhythm of nature in their production cycle. No concentrated feed, no additional purchases. „Our animals are grass-fed and grass-finished – they are fattened on pasture,“ says Prantl.

» It’s not the cow, it’s the how. «

Georg Prantl



From left to right: Georg Prantl, Maren Timmermann, Manuel Winter