# UK cattle farmers urged to reassess forage amid driest conditions since 1997



Cattle farmers in the UK are facing an urgent need to reassess their forage needs amidst an unusually dry spring, a situation that is raising concerns across the agricultural community. While early May brought promising growth rates, the ongoing lack of rainfall threatens to impede this trend, particularly in areas hard-hit by dryness such as Hampshire, Greater Manchester, Lancashire, and Yorkshire.

Katie Evans, senior knowledge exchange manager at the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB), emphasised the critical nature of this dry spell. She cautioned that the absence of adequate rainfall could significantly hinder grass growth, reduce silage yields, and ultimately affect grazing availability. Evans recommended that farmers take proactive steps by evaluating their summer and winter feed requirements and developing contingency strategies. This could involve reviewing silage stocks and considering measures such as earlier cuts to prioritise feed quality, as well as implementing fast-growing catch crops for summer or autumn grazing. Such strategies are crucial for mitigating the impact of dry conditions and ensuring long-term resilience.

The situation is underscored by alarming national statistics: England and Wales recorded some of the driest conditions since 1997, with rainfall measured at a mere 225mm by mid-May—29% below average and the seventh-driest since 1931. The Environment Agency noted that river flows have been markedly reduced, especially in northern regions where some sites reported the lowest April flows on record. Reservoir levels, although still reasonable at about 84% capacity nationally, are particularly low in the North East and North West, prompting concerns over potential water usage restrictions, such as hosepipe bans, in anticipation of worsening drought conditions.

Richard Lane, a dairy advisor at The Dairy Group, has echoed these concerns, indicating that while silage cutting is underway with potentially good quality, yields are subdued on many farms due to the dry weather. "Grass growth has been steady rather than strong," he noted, reflecting the precarious balance farmers currently face as they maintain milk output through buffer feeding. Lane's observations resonate with the broader agricultural challenges, as water companies, including Yorkshire Water and Severn Trent, prepare for potential shortages. The CEO of Thames Water highlighted that while supply is currently stable, usage restrictions may be inevitable if rain does not materialise soon.

The National Drought Group's recent meetings have highlighted an alarming lack of preparedness in the water management sector, with members noting that there is "no slack" in the system. Farmers have begun to irrigate crops earlier than normal, a practice not typically necessary at this time of year, and reports of failing crops have started to emerge. David Exwood, deputy president of the National Farmers’ Union (NFU), warned of the dire consequences of prolonged dry spells, citing the previous year's severe drought as a stark reminder of the threats to both crop and livestock productivity.

Looking towards the future, climate projections suggest that extreme weather events—including droughts—are likely to exacerbate challenges faced by UK agriculture. The modelling outcomes from the AHDB indicate that productivity will face growing risks linked to these climate issues. Analysts note that farmers should continuously evaluate their operations, considering both historical experiences of flooding and the emerging patterns of heatwaves and drought.

In light of these challenges, innovative approaches are essential for maintaining agricultural resilience against weather fluctuations. Farmers are increasingly adopting strategies such as crop diversification and precision agriculture to mitigate losses. Improved drainage systems and cover cropping are among the techniques being implemented to enhance soil structure and promote better water infiltration during dry spells. Livestock management is also evolving, with practices adapting to keep animals healthy despite changing conditions.

As farmers continue to navigate this precarious landscape, it becomes evident that immediate action is necessary not just for current needs but also for safeguarding future productivity. The call to assess forage requirements is more than a reaction to the present; it is a critical step towards ensuring long-term sustainability in an uncertain climate.

### Reference Map

* Paragraph 1: [[1]](https://www.dairyreporter.com/Article/2025/05/19/no-rain-calls-to-action-launched-as-uk-farmers-told-to-assess-forage-needs/)
* Paragraph 2: [[1]](https://www.dairyreporter.com/Article/2025/05/19/no-rain-calls-to-action-launched-as-uk-farmers-told-to-assess-forage-needs/)
* Paragraph 3: [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/8e69c305-8f22-4052-817d-5397f107d8c8)
* Paragraph 4: [[1]](https://www.dairyreporter.com/Article/2025/05/19/no-rain-calls-to-action-launched-as-uk-farmers-told-to-assess-forage-needs/), [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/07/drought-conditions-already-hitting-uk-crop-production-farmers-say)
* Paragraph 5: [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/8e69c305-8f22-4052-817d-5397f107d8c8), [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/07/drought-conditions-already-hitting-uk-crop-production-farmers-say)
* Paragraph 6: [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/07/drought-conditions-already-hitting-uk-crop-production-farmers-say)
* Paragraph 7: [[1]](https://www.dairyreporter.com/Article/2025/05/19/no-rain-calls-to-action-launched-as-uk-farmers-told-to-assess-forage-needs/), [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/07/drought-conditions-already-hitting-uk-crop-production-farmers-say)
* Paragraph 8: [[4]](https://farmonaut.com/united-kingdom/uk-farming-resilience-5-innovative-weather-solutions)
* Paragraph 9: [[5]](https://eciu.net/media/press-releases/2024/confirmed-england-has-second-worst-harvest-on-record-with-fears-mounting-for-2025)
* Paragraph 10: [[4]](https://farmonaut.com/united-kingdom/uk-farming-resilience-5-innovative-weather-solutions)
* Paragraph 11: [[6]](https://www.ceh.ac.uk/press/scientists-predict-what-will-be-top-of-the-crops-by-2080-due-to-climate-change)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dairyreporter.com/Article/2025/05/19/no-rain-calls-to-action-launched-as-uk-farmers-told-to-assess-forage-needs/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/8e69c305-8f22-4052-817d-5397f107d8c8> - England and Wales are experiencing their driest year since 1997, with only 225mm of rainfall recorded by mid-May 2025—29% below average—making it the seventh-driest year since 1931. The Environment Agency's latest report highlights significantly reduced river flows, particularly in northern regions, where six sites logged their lowest-ever April flows. The agency has issued a medium drought risk warning and anticipates potential water usage restrictions, such as hosepipe bans. Reservoirs remain around 84% full, but levels are notably low in the North East and North West, which have seen their driest start to a year since 1929. Farmers are increasingly concerned, with early irrigation underway in some areas despite good groundwater reserves. Water companies like Yorkshire Water, United Utilities, and Severn Trent are preparing for possible shortages. Thames Water's CEO affirmed that supply would continue but cautioned that usage restrictions may be necessary depending on future rainfall. The report links recent dry conditions to climate change, predicting more frequent summer droughts in the coming decades.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/07/drought-conditions-already-hitting-uk-crop-production-farmers-say> - Members of the National Drought Group, who met on Wednesday to discuss their plans, told the Guardian that there is “no slack” in the system, that water companies are “woefully underprepared” for drought and the plan for many is “simply praying for rain”. It has been the driest start to spring in 69 years. England saw its driest March since 1961 and in April the country received just half its normal rainfall. Farmers have had to start irrigating crops earlier, and reservoir levels are either notably or exceptionally low across the north-east and north-west of England. England faces drought this summer as reservoir water levels dwindle. According to the National Farmers’ Union (NFU) some crops are already failing, and significant rainfall in early May will be essential to avoid significant yield penalties and further losses. Livestock yields could also be at risk; grazing is not yet short, but farmers point out that fields will need a decent amount of rain to get animals through the summer. NFU deputy president, David Exwood, said: “The dry conditions and lack of any substantial rainfall has meant farmers in some parts of the country have started to irrigate crops much earlier than normal. The extreme weather patterns we have experienced over the past few years are impacting our ability to feed the nation.” The last time the UK was hit with a bad drought was 2022, when crops failed and London and the south-east almost ran out of water and were weeks from going into emergency measures. There were also hosepipe bans across the country. Experts at the NDG said the conditions this year are similar to those in 2022. Reservoir levels are lower than they were this time in 2022, however. Reservoir storage across England is 84% of total capacity, compared to 90% at the end of April in 2022. The NDG heard that a number of reservoirs in the north are well below what they should be for this time of year, and that northern water companies are upping their activities around fixing leaks ahead of summer. They are already looking at extracting from rivers, months before they would generally need to, and river flows are exceptionally low at present.
4. <https://farmonaut.com/united-kingdom/uk-farming-resilience-5-innovative-weather-solutions> - In the face of adverse weather conditions, UK farmers are adopting various crop yield reduction strategies to mitigate losses and maintain productivity. Some of these strategies include: 1. Crop Diversification: Planting a variety of crops with different weather tolerances to spread risk. 2. Precision Agriculture: Utilizing technology to optimize planting, fertilization, and harvesting based on field-specific data. 3. Improved Drainage Systems: Installing or upgrading drainage to manage excess water more effectively. 4. Cover Cropping: Using cover crops to improve soil structure and water infiltration during fallow periods. These strategies are crucial in helping farmers adapt to changing weather patterns and maintain crop yields despite challenging conditions. Livestock Management in Adverse Weather Livestock farmers in the UK are facing unique challenges due to the persistent wet weather. Livestock management in adverse weather conditions requires careful planning and innovative approaches: \* Extended Housing Periods: Keeping animals indoors for longer to protect them from wet and muddy conditions. \* Alternative Feeding Strategies: Implementing new feeding regimes to compensate for reduced grazing opportunities. \* Health Monitoring: Increased vigilance for weather-related health issues such as respiratory problems and foot conditions. \* Adaptable Housing Solutions: Developing flexible shelter options that can be quickly deployed in fields during sudden weather changes. These strategies are essential for maintaining animal welfare and productivity in the face of challenging weather conditions. For farmers looking to enhance their livestock management strategies, Farmonaut offers advanced satellite-based monitoring solutions.
5. <https://eciu.net/media/press-releases/2024/confirmed-england-has-second-worst-harvest-on-record-with-fears-mounting-for-2025> - Data released shows England experienced its second worst harvest since 1983 after record breaking wet weather last winter, with recent downpours leaving many farmers unable to drill crops again. The Defra data broadly reflects earlier estimates by the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit (ECIU) and is likely to leave many farmers out of pocket. Based on current prices, the ECIU estimates that the shortfall in production this year compared to 2023 could see farmers lose £600m in revenue on just the five crops covered by this data. Commenting on the Defra harvest statistics, Tom Lancaster, land, food and farming analyst at the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit (ECIU) said: “This year’s harvest was a shocker, and climate change is to blame.
6. <https://www.ceh.ac.uk/press/scientists-predict-what-will-be-top-of-the-crops-by-2080-due-to-climate-change> - While climate change is likely to present significant challenges to agriculture in coming decades, it could also mean that crops such as chickpeas, soybeans and oranges are widely grown across the UK, and home-produced hummus, tofu and marmalade are a common sight on our supermarket shelves by 2080. A new study led by the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (UKCEH) in collaboration with the University of East Anglia (UEA) predicts that future warmer temperatures in this country would be suitable for a variety of produce such as oranges, chickpeas and okra that are traditionally grown in warmer parts of the world. Scientists investigated the future suitability for over 160 existing and new food crops in different regions of the UK under warming scenarios of 2 and 4 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial times. The modelling study, part of the OpenCLIM research project, is the most comprehensive research of its kind to date and is also the first to show how suitability for certain produce will vary across the UK. It provides mapped projections for every 1km square in the UK, giving valuable information to the farming and food sectors on the future opportunities and challenges of cultivating new crops here.