



EverCrop® gets farmers' attention

By Laureta Wallace
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ABOVE: EverCrop researchers assess a New South Wales EverCrop trial. (Photo: Dr Rick Llewellyn)

Farmers across southern Australia are getting involved in EverCrop®, motivated by a desire to find new, more profitable and reliable pasture systems in the face of a drier farming environment.

“We have found keen groups of farmers with a real hunger for new pasture options and a willingness by farmers to challenge the status quo,” EverCrop project manager and CSIRO researcher Dr Rick Llewellyn said.

The three-year project, focussing on how perennials can best play a role in Australian

farming systems, is an initiative of the FFI CRC with support from the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC), CSIRO and the various state agriculture departments.

“We’re only part way through our first year of full field work and the interest being generated by some of the perennial options is very encouraging – gaining keen farmer input into the development of these farming system options is critical,” Dr Llewellyn said.

“Climate and risk are definitely significant drivers for farmers to consider new mixed farming options – the past few years have been very dry in places.”

Field work is in full swing across three focus regions: the uniform-rainfall region near Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, a medium-rainfall region in the northern Western Australian wheatbelt and a low-rainfall region in the Mallee region of Victoria and South Australia.

Dr Llewellyn said the project was very much focussed on research and development with farmer involvement.

“The various farmer adaptation groups provide researchers with practical information on the economies of operating a

mixed farm and where they see the potential for perennials to fit into their system.

“The project is made up of a mixture of core research sites with detailed work being carried out on novel plants; on-farm trials, which test the farm and paddock-scale practicalities and performance of perennials; and modelling to evaluate the likely performance and whole-farm economics of the system under a range of current and future scenarios.”

A localised approach

The opportunities for perennial pastures and fodder shrubs varies across Australia according to Dr Llewellyn.

key points

- The EverCrop project is looking at new ways of incorporating perennials into mixed farming systems
- Predicted climate change and current dry conditions are motivating farmers to take part in EverCrop trials
- Fodder shrubs, new perennial pastures and pasture cropping are just some of the new strategies under evaluation.

“In Western Australia the focus is on the relatively new innovation of pasture cropping, which can create both new pasture and grain production options on marginal soils. Research sites in WA are exploring the potential for using perennials such as Rhodes grass and panic as base pastures for over cropping.

“In the Mallee, farmers want to fill the summer-autumn feed gap by making use of land not well suited to cropping and this is where fodder shrubs come in.”

Dr Llewellyn says exciting work is being carried out, in collaboration with the *Enrich* project, on a range of possible new native species that may complement saltbush.

In the southern NSW region, where lucerne is already a staple pasture species, the opportunity for chicory and other perennial grasses to join the fold is under investigation.

“Farmers in this region are also looking at different ways to establish, manage and maintain perennials,” Dr Llewellyn explained.

“In southern NSW the run of dry seasons has many farmers questioning the best way to establish pastures and what further benefits perennials can provide.”

Dr Llewellyn suggests that determining the value and optimal role for perennials in a mixed farming system is complex with many interactions so there has been strong interest in developing the whole-farm analysis tools that help researchers and advisors test the various options.

The economics

According to Dr Llewellyn, a big part of the project so far has been asking the question ‘What would it take for these perennials to be profitable?’

“Because at the end of the day if perennials aren’t economical to establish or if they don’t do something to improve whole-farm performance, farmers will not be interested,” Dr Llewellyn said.

“A key question farmers want to know is how can they establish perennials in way that is low-cost but also reliable.



ABOVE: Western Australian farmers inspect an EverCrop trial site. (Photo: Diana Fedorenko)



LEFT: A chicory root on display. (Photo: EverCrop)

“Other key questions investigate where the best place is for perennials on the farm, what it takes to maintain them and how long will they be productive.

“They also still want to have the flexibility to have a strong cropping program when the season and market permits – perennials need to fit in with this.”

To help answer these questions, the project has an *EverCrop Decide* component that is developing and running analysis tools customised to evaluate the production and profitability of perennials.

Sophisticated models such as APSIM and MIDAS are being used in each region to look at not only what can increase whole-farm profitability, but also under a range of other farm, market and climate scenarios.

“The ability to test the ‘what-if’ scenarios plays a big role in being able to identify future farming systems that offer both profitability and natural resource management benefits,” Dr Llewellyn said.

Looking forward

Options for the different rainfall zones are likely to be different so each *EverCrop* region has a team and a leader focussed on the local opportunities and needs.

“This is work that has an eye on not just the short term but longer-term outcomes and what is likely to provide valuable mixed farming options for farmers many years down the track,” Dr Llewellyn said. 🌱

LEFT: Mixed farming operators are keen to see where perennial pastures will fit in to their cropping systems. (Photo: EverCrop)

More information

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