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Islands plants could provide paradise for Australian pastoralists

Plants native to a small group of sub-tropical islands off the north western coast of Africa could be the answer for making the pastoral areas of Australia more adaptable to drought and climate variability.

The Canary Islands, located off the coast of Morocco, are home to a range of plants that have the remarkable ability of staying green and lush throughout their long and dry summers.

Future Farm Industries CRC (FFI CRC) plant breeder Dr Daniel Real said some of the island's legumes, plants that put nitrogen into the soil, have the potential to provide green feed throughout the summer.

"The islands are home to many microclimates, with the plants originating from an area that receives less than 200 mm of rainfall a year, making them already drought tolerant and well suited to the Australian climate," Dr Real said.

Trials in Australia have focused on the two variations of the species *Bituminaria bituminosa*.

"At trial plantings at five sites in Western Australia, the plants survived the 2006-07 summer – one of the driest on record," Dr Real said.

"The trial plots at sites near the WA wheatbelt towns of Newdegate and Buntine were also stripped back by locusts in December 2006, but by March 2007 they were about 30 cm tall."

Grazing trials have shown that the plants are palatable, able to resprout after heavy grazing, and have 65 % digestibility and 15 % protein.

A follow-up trial is planned for June 2008 once the CRC has secured a reliable seed supply.

"The next trial will have FFI CRC PhD and University of Western Australia Honours students working together to accelerate the breeding process, assess the plants' performance, and put together information packs for farmers," Dr Real added.

"Our work to date also suggests that *Bituminaria bituminosa* poses a low-weed risk."

FFI CRC was formed in July 2007 to build on the former Cooperative Research Centre for the Plant-based Management of Dryland Salinity's work to make dryland agriculture in southern Australia more adaptable through innovative research, education and training, and commercialisation.

Media Enquiries: Greg Lawrence

T: 0429 101 675

E: greg.lawrence@futurefarmcrc.com.au

Further information: www.futurefarmcrc.com.au