



Native pastures strike a chord

By **Catriona Nicholls**
KONDININ GROUP

According to the latest market research, producers are keen to increase their knowledge about perennial pastures and incorporate both native and introduced species into their livestock enterprises.

Agronomist Kate Sargeant, Department of Primary Industries, Victoria (DPI Victoria) recently gathered information from 240 producers involved with *EverGraze*® – *More livestock from perennials project* Supporting Sites in Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria and northern New South Wales.

“We were keen to determine the potential market for our messages and research by investigating producers’ current attitudes and practices,” Kate said.

“The investigation also allowed us to determine some evaluation benchmarks for our Supporting Sites.”

Kate focussed her investigations on the current use of phosphorus fertiliser, attitudes towards native perennial pastures, the current use of a range of perennial species in existing grazing operations, grazing practices and preferences, the management of hill country and lamb marking percentages.

Phosphorus – spreading the news

Across the regions surveyed, producers seem more likely to apply phosphorus on a regular basis to their low-lying and undulating pastures and not so regularly on their steep, hilly pastures, most often dominated by native pastures (see Figure 1).

“Further investigations revealed this trend was linked to economic factors and weed control, as opposed to a belief that native pastures would not respond or be damaged by phosphorus application,” Kate explained.

Steep learning curve

Investigations into grazing practices on hilly country revealed that many producers have difficulty managing environmental triggers (groundcover and feed availability) for removing stock in these areas in conjunction with production triggers.

“A small proportion of respondents agreed that they graze stock more heavily on hills during spring to control annuals,” Kate said. “But most remove stock from hills to lamb or calve allowing annuals to set seed, to provide winter feed – transferring grazing pressure to more productive areas in the landscape.”

“Most producers also admit that they use grazing management in their hilly country to increase or maintain native pasture content in addition to maintaining groundcover and weed control.”

An overriding message coming from producers is that they are keen to learn more about managing native grasses (see Figure 2).

LEFT: Market research suggests producers are keen to learn more about native pastures. (Photo: Meredith Mitchell, DPI Victoria)

Kate believes the message for the *EverGraze* extension team is the need for a troubleshooting component into current grazing management courses to accommodate the needs of stock and pastures in a grazing management plan and calendar.

“We also need to develop some economics around the different triggers for removing stock, which are outlined in the *EverGraze* native pasture management fact sheet,” Kate said.

“There is a possible market for extension to promote the benefits of strategic grazing, providing practical steps for implementation, but recognising that producers are already consciously managing their native pastures.

“At a Proof Site level, there is an opportunity to measure the effects of summer grazing of native grasses. We can then make sound recommendations for how producers can best use the valuable summer green pick the natives provide, while not damaging their persistence.”

Setting the scene

Overall, respondents seem sold on the benefits of rotational grazing, but 45 per cent of respondents still use set stocking, according to Kate.

“Producers clearly identify and appreciate that rotational grazing improves persistence and production of perennials, provides

FIGURE 1. Frequency of phosphorus fertiliser application by land class

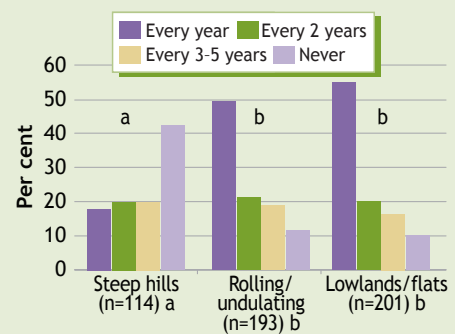
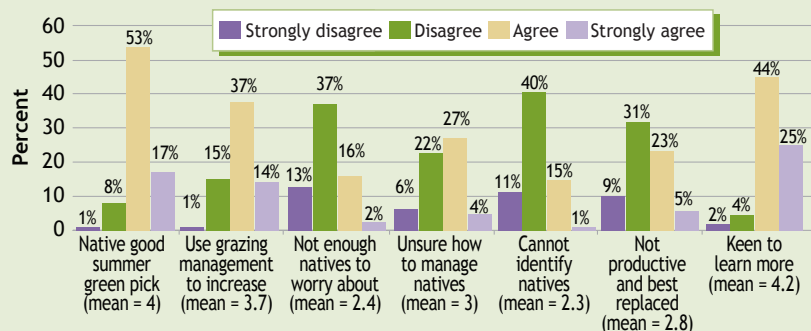


FIGURE 2. Attitudes and practices relating to native grasses*



*Note: Respondents who answered “does not apply or no opinion” are not represented in these graphs.

key points

- Recent market research has uncovered producer attitudes towards perennial pastures
- Producers across Australia are keen to manage their native perennial pastures better and to learn more about them
- Results from the market research will help drive the National *EverGraze* Extension Program.

greater groundcover, allows for more even grazing and winter pasture growth and helps maintain native grass species,” Kate said.

“Managing several mobs and poor access to water points were identified as key reasons that grazing management was restricted or impractical on some properties.

“A significantly higher proportion of mixed sheep and cattle properties used set stocking compared to those running sheep or beef only. The mixed enterprises also ran less intensive rotations with less paddocks.

“The practical restrictions to rotational grazing mean we need to focus now on implementation strategies, rather than selling the benefits when delivering rotational grazing workshops.”

When questioned about the triggers used to identify the need to move stock to the next paddock in a rotation, producers revealed they were using proven triggers such as kilograms of dry matter per hectare (kgDM/ha) and leaf stage, skills used in programs such as *Beefcheque*, *Prograze* and *Sustainable Grazing Systems*.

“This is exciting as it shows that producers are using the skills learnt through our extension programs.” Kate said.

Appreciating perennials

As Kate dug deeper to better understand attitudes toward particular species she found that phalaris is the most widely accepted and used species across most regions (see Figure 3).

“Of all the winter-active perennials, producers rated phalaris* highest for production and environmental benefits, except in terms of winter production in south-west Victoria, where perennial ryegrass rated higher,” Kate said.

The message is to focus on educating for better phalaris establishment, minimise weed risks and to use phalaris as the benchmark when comparing alternative species. Producers also lack a strong understanding of the benefits or production requirements of tall fescue (winter or summer-active) so this also could be a market for further extension.

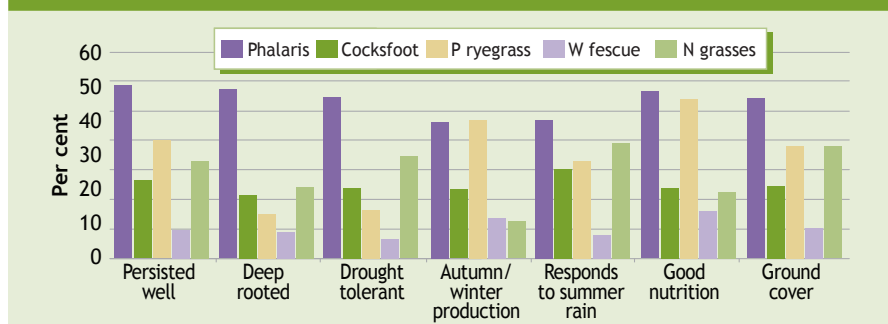
Getting active over summer

There is still significant potential for lucerne across a wide range of uses including:

- Hay or silage production for on-farm use of sale
- Green feed during summer
- Filling the summer/autumn feed gap
- Fodder to maintain or finish young stock during summer
- Drought management
- Improving soil health and nitrogen availability.

Most producers are not using their lucerne pasture as a specific tool to manage salinity, maintain breeding stock, as part of their cropping rotation, to maintain groundcover, or to increase ewe and cow nutrition levels before joining.

FIGURE 3. Producer attitudes toward pasture species



Lucerne isn't the only summer-active option available and about 20% of respondents were interested in using summer actives but don't know enough about other options. Encouragingly, 85% said they were interested in learning more.

Current reasons for not sowing summer-active perennials were:

- Concern about high establishment costs (all species)
- Don't know enough about it (this was more significant for smaller farms and kikuyu and chicory)
- Soils not appropriate (lucerne)
- Insufficient summer rainfall (all species).

Findings from the study have been presented to the *EverGraze* extension team and used to tailor the national extension plan. An

advanced strategy is in place in Victoria, and a similar process will follow in other States. The findings will also be used to design new *EverGraze* training packages for grazing management and pasture establishment to be rolled out early next year.

*Phalaris – The FFI CRC Weed Risk Assessment team cautions producers to manage the environmental weed risk posed by phalaris. For more information on the weed risk status of phalaris go to www.futurefarmcrc.com.au/weed_risks.html
EverGraze – More livestock from perennials is a FFI CRC, AWI and MLA research and delivery partnership. ↴

More information

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Fellowship recognises post-graduate perennial work

Meredith Mitchell, Proof Site leader for the Albury/Wodonga *EverGraze* site was recently awarded the highly-contested AW Howard Memorial Research Fellowship. The award recognises students who have a research project pertaining to the development, management and use of pastures.

Meredith has worked for 20 years for the Victorian Department of Primary Industries. During that time she has established a reputation for her skills and knowledge about Australian native grasses.

Meredith has been involved in research aimed at devising management strategies that improve the profitability of native pastures while protecting them from degradation. She also has a long history in native grassland research that includes evaluation of native and low input grass species.

“My studies will deal with important attributes of *Microlaena* in grazing systems, particularly how it survives prolonged summer water deficit and some of the basic population level information needed to understand its behaviour,” Meredith said.

“*Microlaena* is one of the most useful of the native grass species found in farmers' paddocks, but despite this, little is known about the basic ecology of the species.”

“On many farms, a proportion of the land is suited to high input, introduced pasture systems, while other land is better (or only) suited to lower input pastures, typically dominated by native species.

“*Microlaena stipoides* is widespread in the native pastures of south-eastern Australia, although its proportion is arguably less than it could be.”

After completing her PhD, Meredith hopes to provide new findings that farmers can use to better manage this species.

Meredith has started her doctoral studies at Charles Sturt University (CSU) with assistance from CSU and FFI CRC.

The \$15,000 AW Howard Memorial Research Fellowship bursary will help finance Meredith's research and field experiments. ↴

More information

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