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New perennial grasses to keep pastures green in drying climate says workshop convenor

Breeding new perennial grasses varieties to boost productivity in the drier parts of southern Australia is the focus of a Future Farm Industries CRC (FFI CRC) workshop being held this week.

Workshop convenor, FFI CRC Research Director, Dr Mike Ewing, said the lower rainfall parts of southern Australia lack good perennial grass pasture options.

“The original scope of our research five years ago was to find a range of plants suited to these marginal areas,” Dr Ewing said.

However with southern Australia experiencing a decline in rainfall, it has become clear we now need new cultivars to increase pasture performance even in areas where perennial grasses are in use.

Perennial grasses, when used in combination with other established species, have the potential to create permanent pasture systems due to their ability to access water deep in the soil profile and remain active during the summer.

Research by the National Perennial Grass Improvement Initiative, the former CRC Salinity and more recently the FFI CRC has worked with sub-tropical and temperate grasses.

“Already the signs are promising, with some tropical grass cultivars performing very well at trials in the Western Australian wheatbelt and northern NSW,” Dr Ewing said.

The temperate species focus is on breeding new perennial grasses where pastures are dominated by unproductive annual grasses and weeds on the inland slopes of the Great Dividing Range in Victoria and NSW.

“We are now building on the work done by CRC Salinity and CSIRO that created new cocksfoot, tall fescue and phalaris cultivars with improved productivity and are capable of surviving in low-rainfall environments,” Dr Ewing said.

“These next-generation cultivars will be water efficient and suitable complements to lucerne in phase farming systems in the target regions, which will help farmers remain productive in a drying climate.”

Running in tandem with this breeding program will be the development of agronomic packages that feature optimum grazing management practices for these new cultivars – which will be delivered by the FFI CRC and its partners.

“Just as important as breeding these new plants, is developing new ways to incorporate them into current farming systems and then working closely with farmers to show them how it can be done,” Dr Ewing said.

The FFI CRC Perennials Grasses Workshop will be held at Inverell, Bingara and Barraba in NSW on 19-20 November 2008.

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Further information: www.futurefarmcrc.com.au Future Farm Industries Cooperative Research Centre aims to transform Australian agriculture and rural landscapes by developing and applying Profitable Perennials™ technologies to innovative farming systems and new regional industries.
