



# Perennials earn their place in mixed farming systems

Photo: Maree Doyle

**R**ising water tables, increasing soil salinity and predictions for less and variable rainfall and higher temperatures have seen perennial forage plants dubbed a likely saviour for southern Australian farming systems.

A new publication put together by FFI CRC Researcher (UWA) Sarita Bennett, aims to inform farmers of their perennial plant options and how they can best incorporate the non-traditional forage into their cropping and grazing enterprise.

The *Prospects for profitable perennials in mixed farming systems* publication brings together six years of research carried out by the former CRC for Plant-based Management of Dryland Salinity and provides perennial pasture options for farming regions across southern Australia.

"It takes a region-by-region approach based on temperature, rainfall and soil type," Dr Bennett said.

## key points

- A new *Prospects Statement* opens the door to information on incorporating perennials into mixed farming systems
- Perennials require more strategic management than annual pastures
- The latest *Prospects Statement* provides clear guidelines for species selection and management and is supported by practical on-farm case studies.

"During the past lucerne has been the most popular perennial, but this research also looks at other legumes, grasses and herbs."

### Benefits year after year

The right perennial forage plant can offer farmers out-of-season feed and become a tool in the fight against salinity. But a decision to incorporate perennials needs to be carefully considered.

"In many cases farmers will be required to change their cropping and grazing strategies," Dr Bennett said.

"For example, they will need to make a switch from one-year-on-one cropping to rotations of three or four years.

"Perennials also require more strategic grazing, so rotational grazing not set stocking is often a preferred option."

### The ultimate guide

For farmers, the *Prospects for profitable perennials in mixed farming* will act as the ultimate guide to perennial forages allowing them to quickly and easily find out what plants are suited to their area, the cultivars available and how they will add value to their operation.

"Farmers may narrow their options down to three plants and then take their information to an extension officer for more guidance."

Dr Bennett said some farmers may have been deterred from perennials during the past, particularly lucerne, due to difficulties getting the forage established.

"Perennials can be hard to establish – some prefer to be sown during spring rather than autumn, which leaves farmers dependent on spring and early summer rain.

"By using the comprehensive guide farmers can become informed about what other perennials are likely to work in their area."

Farmer case studies also provide practical examples of, where and how various perennials have worked.

"And while the case studies will be specific to certain farming areas, in many cases the same principles can be applied in other regions."

A cost-benefit analysis of perennial plants compared with annual forage and supplementary feed is also included as well as details on the weed risk assessment employed by the FFI CRC.

The *Prospects for profitable perennials in mixed farming systems* publication is set to be released early during 2009.

"Finding new forage plants for Australia's low-rainfall areas is a priority research area at the moment and there are some exciting things in the pipeline," Dr Bennett said.

### Extending the mix

*Prospects for profitable perennials* is the fourth title in the FFI CRC's *Prospects Statements* series. The series aims to synthesise existing knowledge across a range of key farming technologies. The *Statements* address the case for current investment in the technologies, the limits and risks of applications, and future development opportunities. Other titles in the series include: *Lucerne prospects*, *Integrated forestry on farmland* and *Saltland Prospects*. 🌱

## contact

- Greg Lawrence  
T: (08) 6488 7353  
E: greg.lawrence@futurefarmcrc.com.au