Profitable perennials in mixed systems — the guide

LEFT: Soon to be released, the latest Prospects Statement *provides a guide for farmers to incorporate perennials successfully into mixed farming systems. (Photo: P Lawson)*

By Sarita Bennett
FFI CRC

Rising water tables, increasing levels of soil salinity and acidification were the initial drivers for change from traditional farming systems. The impacts of climate change, alternative competing industries and market forces are now proving alternative drivers for change.

During 2004, the total area of perennial-based farming systems in southern Australia was estimated to be about three million hectares out of a total of 100 Mha of cleared farmland. The remainder being dominated by annual species.

What does it take to persuade a landholder to change their farming system from an annual-based system to a perennial-based one? Understandably, the economics have to be favourable before change is considered, yet will this be apparent if they change the farm one paddock at a time?

Other concerns focus on how much of a farm should be under a perennial-based system for the landholder to reap the maximum benefit.

And how many years will the farm need to include perennials before the landholder will start to see the benefits and returns?

One of the obvious advantages of sowing perennial pastures is the availability of green feed at a time of year when it is scarce. Many farmers who have adopted a perennial-based system have increased their whole-farm carrying capacity, so they can turn off more animals.

Even so, many landholders are reticent to adopt more perennials.

key points

- The fourth title in the FFI CRC's Prospects Statement series is nearing completion
- *Prospects for profitable perennials in mixed farming systems* provides vaulable information for 12 regions across southern Australia
- Research outcomes and species information is supported by practical case studies highlighting successful adoption of perennials on farm.

Supporting change

A critical adoption tool for advisors, extension offers and landholders will be the fourth title in the FFI CRC's *Prospects Statement* series — *Prospects for profitable perennials in mixed farming systems.*

The publication will attempt to answer the questions outlined above according to FFI CRC researcher and publication coordinator Dr Sarita Bennett (UWA).

"Sections are included on the economics of different perennial-based farming systems, what perennials are available, including a summary of our increased knowledge about perennial forages and the potential new varieties that have emerged from research undertaken through the former CRC for Plant-based Management of Dryland Salinity," Dr Bennett said.

"Southern Australia has been broken into 12 regions for this *Prospects Statement* and within each region a table of the suitable perennial grasses, legumes and herbs is presented.

Details on rainfall, soil and other constraints that could limit the suitability of a perennial are provided within tables."

Readers can find further information on each listed species in the publication's appendices, along with a reference to a website which provides guidelines for sowing and managment.

On-farm experience

The publication features five case studies of farmers who have adopted perennials into their farming system. Their decision to include perennials, the issues they faced in changing the farming system to include perennials and their current success are highlights of these case studies.

The final section of the *Prospects Statement* deals specifically with areas where there are few perennial forage options available, including the low-rainfall areas of southern Australia. It also provides details of species identified as having potential in these target areas. The publication also highlights the research areas that FFI CRC plans to target in the future and provides a valuable backdrop to ongoing research under the FFI CRC *Future Cropping Systems* program (see following boxed story).

More information

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