



Service providers get in on the act

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Dairy farmers have greater access to information on growing cereals following participation in the Project 3030 *Forage Insights Activity* supported by Dairy Australia.

The recent drought/dry seasons has seen a renewed interest in the growing of dual purpose and forage cereals. This has raised the issue of how farmers can access information needed to successfully grow forage cereals.

Enter Forage Insights, a new approach to getting research and experiential learning to farmers and service providers. Wayne Bowden, a well known and respected forage industry contractor in the Yarram district and Stuart Bland, a dairy farmer of Alberton West, have both been searching for new options to help fill feed gaps in the all too often dry seasons being experienced in the eastern end of South Gippsland.

Wayne said “I have raised eyebrows in the recent dry years by growing forage cereal crops, such as Monstress and Abacus triticales, Gairdner Barley and Mackellar winter wheat, in my front paddocks. People have stopped, looked, and then have called in to ask how I had grown so much with so little water/rain and what the heck were the crops?”

He also “felt that as input costs, such as fertiliser, sprays and fuel, continually rise, it may be more efficient and cheaper for some farmers to transport inputs in and grow their own crop versus transporting in a bulk crop sown elsewhere.

Wayne has already “seen in 2008 only about 50% germination rates of ryegrass sown for nine weeks earlier this year in some paddocks in the Yarram area compared to 100% for forage cereals.” With a small amount of rain, the cereals will grow at faster rates than the ryegrass but the ryegrasses will come to the fore in producing high quality in early spring. “Several farmers have already approached me asking what cereals could I sow for them at this late stage (May) to help fill the shortfall being left behind by the poor performing ryegrasses.”

Stuart said he had “played around with cereal crops to help get some new tussocky land into operation quickly a year earlier.” He was so impressed by the rapid growth and high yields of the forage cereals that he was a willing partner in a Forage Insight Activity in the local area. He said, “I could see the potential for growing a forage cereal on the run-off block and transporting it to the home block to feed my milking herd, a few kilometres away when I was short of feed.”

The Yarram Forage Insight Activity group was formed with Wayne, Stuart, other local farmers, seed and spray company representatives, local milk factory staff and DPI front man, Frank Mickan. This group was a mix of wise heads with a wide range of expertise in all aspects of growing cereal crops. We were also fortunate to have involved a local cereal grower, Trent Anderson of Darriman, whose practical knowledge of the local area for cereal growing was invaluable.

Research from Project 3030 was providing valuable information, but how to get it used on farm? What could be better than using a group of forage industry service providers and some farmers interested in growing cereals to supplement their home-grown forage supply. The service providers would then be in a position to pass their new knowledge and experiences to a much wider audience (farmers, contractors, other service providers and their peers).

Frank Mickan, DPI extension officer of Project 3030, instigated and facilitated the above and four other Forage Insight Activity (FIA) groups in 2007. Each group was different in its mix of seed company agronomists, fertiliser company reps, sowing and fodder conservation contractors, private agronomists and interested local farmers. The other four FIA's were based in Heyestbury Lower, Nilma North, Gundowring and Corryong.

The aim of each group, initially, was to sow one forage cereal to show its potential production using the best known management practices using the input from the "collective group of wise minds". Well, get a group of service providers together and suddenly Stuart and Wayne were growing a main crop of Mackellar wheat in two paddocks and three oat cultivars in a section of one of the paddocks!

Since this was a run-off block running heifers and dries, and hearing about other 3030 research investigating the grazing of forage cereals, Stuart, Wayne and the rest of the FIA group thought it a good idea to graze some of these crops as well. How much will the winter wheat and each oat cultivar grow? When should it be grazed? How hard can it be grazed? How much, if at all, will we knock silage yields? And what is the quality of these crops at various stages? These and many other questions were on our minds.

The beauty of this group (and the other four) was that the activity mainly involved "in the paddock in real time" inspections and discussions. After the initial meeting to discuss what Stuart and Wayne had in mind, the entire group provided input and made suggestions as to suitability of the varieties chosen, sowing rate, fertiliser needed, weed control, etc. Generous support from the seed company representatives involved, Simon Hunt of Stephen Pasture Seeds and Josh Green of Heritage Seeds, allowed the group to compare the wheat with the oat cultivars on demonstration basis only, not as a fully fledged experiment.

The second meeting was the day of sowing and did we get some great discussion between contractors and seed company guys with the farmers often telling everyone how it really is! By the same token, the farmers and some of the "experts" could understand why other experts are so pedantic on many aspects of crop management. Nothing like seeing the results in the paddock, or lack of results, where wrong decisions are made or consequences of late timing are so obvious,.

Cuts were taken to estimate dry matter yields and nutritive values to aid the paddock discussion at various stages. These cuts were taken from the higher yielding areas of each treatment because the aim was to determine the *potential* yield of the cereals in each location and current growing conditions. The yields were only a rough guide for each crop but did reflect the trends between crops and taught the group to estimate yields and nutritive values.

The third meeting discussed the grazing of the cereals. When can/should they be grazed? How low can they be grazed? How do they compare to the king in production and quality? How late can they be grazed, etc?

A fourth meeting was held at the time of harvesting the crops for silage. Cuts were again taken for yield and quality. The pros and cons of harvesting forage cereals at the boot/flag leaf stage (lower yield but higher quality) versus the later soft dough stage (much higher yield but lower quality) was discussed. These results and the whole year's program were discussed early in 2008 when most of the group could attend.

Bottom lines:

- Everyone gained substantial new knowledge and experiences from real time growing of the crop(s)
- Most importantly, we all learned from each other
- The “experts” learnt to consider many other factors from the farmers’ point of view in addition to their usual supply of technical information.
- Many farmers, despite some drawbacks of growing forage cereals, have renewed confidence to try the latest generation of forage cereals
- The service providers were very happy to be involved with this new approach to gaining new knowledge and experience
- Farmers and contractors will be serviced by more informed service providers



Photos 1 and 2 Yarram FIA group discussing sowing in paddock.



Photo 3. Gary Condron of Rodwells, Sale, explaining growth stage to group



Photo 4. Galileo oats at harvest height