

WIREGRASS CONTROL ON THE NORTH-WEST SLOPES.

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The problem

Native pastures of the North-West Slopes are dominated by summer growing native perennial grasses (Williams, 1979). These grasses are frost susceptible and provide little winter nutrition, hence the widespread occurrence of "winter feed drought" in this region. Although evergreen native perennial grasses are less abundant, they can provide better quality feed during winter and spring.

Wiregrass (*Aristida ramosa*) is one of the main summer growing grasses and is widespread. This coarse tussocky grass is of low forage value (Lodge and Whalley, 1983) and in addition its sharp three awned seed is responsible for ilthrift, wool, hide and carcass contamination. The cost of grass seed contamination varies seasonally but losses in producers profitability are estimated at 30c to 70c/kg for wool, up to \$3-00/skin and \$10-00/carcass depending on the amount of trimming required. Obviously, reducing wiregrass could not only increase carrying capacity, through better nutrition, but also increase producers returns.

Producers survey

In 1985 Wilson Market Research Pty Ltd conducted a survey for the Department of Agriculture in which landholders in the Manilla, Barraba, Parry and Nundle shires were surveyed by mail questionnaire.

The main points to come out of this survey were:

- * 74% of producers have wiregrass on their properties.
- * 83% of producers with wiregrass considered it a problem, however, most were unaware of what wiregrass was costing them in lost returns, penalties and discounts for grass seed contamination.
- * 16% of producers had tried to control wiregrass.
- * 80% of those who tried to control it were unsuccessful.

Controlling wiregrass with grazing management.

Recently grazing management has been shown to be a successful means of manipulating species abundance in native pastures (Lodge and Whalley, 1985) reducing the amount of wiregrass and favouring the more valuable evergreen grasses.

Heavy grazing with wethers during summer and autumn reduces wiregrass vigour, prevents it from seeding and stops seedling establishment. Conversely, resting, by the removal of stock during winter and spring enables valuable evergreen species particularly Wallaby grass (*Danthonia spp.*) to actively grow, produce seed and assists in successful seedling establishment.

Burning wiregrass dominant pastures in late winter or early spring, in conjunction with heavy summer grazing has also proved successful in controlling wiregrass. Fire improves pasture quality by removing the poor quality dead herbage and encouraging the growth of green leaves.

Adoption of wiregrass control

The survey results indicated that producers were extremely interested in controlling wiregrass and willing to try new methods.

To provide information on what wiregrass was costing producers in both carrying capacity and grass seed contamination and to demonstrate successful means of controlling wiregrass a Wiregrass Action Group (W.A.G) was established. This group has been successful in promoting producer awareness of the costs of wiregrass and low cost ways of controlling it by:

- 1) The commissioning of a survey to determine the extent of the wiregrass problem and producers attitudes to overcoming wiregrass.
- 2) The establishment of large scale demonstration areas on producers properties to show graziers the management techniques for control.
- 3) Production of poster displays for use at shows, conferences, meetings and field days.
- 4) Publication of an information sheet "Getting Started in Wiregrass Control", and a regular newsletter.
- 5) Production of a video on wiregrass control.
- 6) Planning schools on native grass recognition, use and management for a number of northern centres.

The response from producers has been highly encouraging. Many graziers are now aware that wiregrass control is low cost and can substantially increase their profitability.