Fescue for Meat Project

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The Fescue for Meat Project is a technology adoption project which commenced with pastures sown in 1995 and 1996. The aims of the project are:

- to increase the area sown to improved tall fescue cultivars and to demonstrate the efficient establishment of tall fescue pastures;
- to evaluate stock performance as a result of improved feed quality and palatability of new tall fescue cultivars;
- to develop a management package that will enable graziers to gain maximum benefit from using tall fescue pastures; and
- to identify new areas where tall fescue pastures can be successfully grown under management suited to tall fescue.

Tall fescue pastures are suited to fertile soils in medium high rainfall areas (700 mm plus rainfall) in temperate Australia. They are legume friendly and respond well to summer rain and irrigation. The deeper root system of tall fescues help them to be more drought tolerant and respond quicker to rain than ryegrasses. They also provide better summer growth with higher leaf to stem ratios and heat tolerance than perennial ryegrasses.

The perception that tall fescue grasses are of lower quality with less seedling vigour than ryegrasses has been gained from older varieties. New cultivars have recently been developed to improve seedling vigour (Easton *et al.* 1994) and animal performance. They offer Australian graziers excellent potential for developing pastures capable of producing improved live weight gains in cattle and sheep.

Method

29 farms have been selected in regions where tall fescue is currently used, and in others where it is not commonly used but has potential if managed to suit tall fescue. These farms are located in south east Queensland (1), New South Wales (21), Victoria (6), and South Australia (1). On each farm whole paddocks (from 4 to 44 hectares) have been sown with new cultivars of tall fescue and compared with similar sowings of old tall fescue cultivars, or the typical seed mix or resident pasture for the region. The main pasture species used as comparators include cv. Demeter tall fescue, perennial ryegrass, phalaris, and a cocksfoot/phalaris mix. All swards contain legume species appropriate to each district, sown at equal rates in each comparative pasture mix.

On each farm the owner or manager is carrying out a major part of the trial work of pasture establishment, animal grazing management, and collection of data on grazing days and live weight gain per hectare of sheep or beef cattle. Each farm has a supervisor appointed to assist the farmer and to collect further data on development costs, persistence of plants, the value of animal products produced, and to calculate benefits and costs of establishing new tall fescue / legume pastures compared with current pasture mixes.

The results generated on live weight gains, benefit cost analyses, and profitability of tall fescue pastures compared with other pastures will be explained to farmers and advisors through on-farm field days, co-learning groups, progress reports mailed to interested people, press releases and conference papers.

Discussion

This method of farmer adoption of new pasture materials has been developed by Grassline® (Milne *et al.* 1993). It gives farmers the opportunity of developing animal production data in realistic commercial conditions on farms and in a range of districts. This approach gives farmers confidence in the practicality and relevance of the results, and provides the financial and production data required for making decisions about changing pasture types on their farms.

Acknowledgments

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References

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