

Evaluation of Landholders' Attitudes towards Perennial Pasture Systems in Southern NSW and the Role of Consol lovegrass (*Eragrostis curvula*)

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Consol lovegrass (*Eragrostis curvula*) is a relatively new perennial grass cultivar which differs in several important respects from the traditional perennial grasses sown in southern NSW. Consol is summer active, and is adapted to infertile light textured soils (Johnston *et al.* 1991). A three year project funded by the National Landcare Program seeks to evaluate possible roles for Consol lovegrass on types of land where conventional grass cultivars lack persistence. As part of this project, students from the University of Western Sydney - Hawkes-bury, conducted surveys of landholder attitudes towards sowing perennial pastures and in particular their attitudes towards Consol lovegrass.

The paper outlines the results of the surveys which sought to:

- Define current landholder and adviser attitudes towards pasture systems in general and perennial pastures more specifically;
- Identify barriers to adoption of Consol lovegrass;
- Provide a benchmark for further evaluation.

Method

Sixty landholders were surveyed in three groups of 20. These groups were centred on Albury, Cootamundra and Tumut in southern NSW. A formal structured interviewing technique was used where on-farm face-to-face contact enabled landholder responses to be gauged qualitatively as well as quantitatively. The survey was designed on the basis that attitudes consist of a combination of

knowledge, feelings and actions (Alreck and Settle, 1995). Five agronomists servicing the areas surveyed were contacted by telephone to obtain their perspectives on Consol lovegrass. Responses were based on a set of five uniform questions concerning their opinion and promotion of Consol.

Results

The major findings from the interviews are summarised in the points which follow.

(1) Farmers believe perennials are important to their pasture system and 85% had sown perennial species, mainly being phalaris and lucerne, with smaller areas for cocksfoot and white clover.

(2) Landholders experience major pasture management problems caused by lack of available quality forage in autumn and winter, and most farmers (85%) would value a perennial species that is persistent and active over summer and could thereby contribute to the autumn feed gap.

(3) Two thirds of farmers were aware of Consol but few had sufficient knowledge to decide if it might be appropriate for their farm - only 25% of all farmers surveyed, knew it was summer growing and acid soil tolerant, and only 15% knew it was specially suited to light-textured soils.

(4) Of those familiar with Consol, 17 (40%) believed it could play a role on their farm, but only two (5%) had actually planted it, while 10 (25%) indicated they planned to sow some over the next 5 years.

Table 1. Information sources for pastures and Consol lovegrass.

Category	Pasture ¹	Consol ²
District agronomist	50	5
Private agronomist	40	0
Rural newspapers	35	39
Dept. Agric. literature	17	15
Field days	30	17
Neighbours	42	3
Landcare	7	17
Past experience	42	0
Family	13	0
Radio	2	5
Grassland society	3	5
Other (eg. seed growers)	8	17

¹% farmers nominating this as one of 3 major sources (n=60); ²% farmers nominating this as source of information on Consol (n=41).

(5) Agronomists (both Government and private) were major sources of information about pastures generally. However, few farmers had heard about Consol from these agronomists (Table 1).

(6) Of the five agronomists interviewed, three believed Consol could possibly play a role in the pasture systems of their district but they were not prepared to recommend it until there was more clear cut evidence of its potential. The remaining two agronomists were highly sceptical of Consol's potential for the region.

Discussion

The results (particularly points 1 and 2) suggest

that the attributes of Consol are consistent with the perceived needs of many farmers of the South West Slopes of NSW. Consol could possibly contribute to the overall feed supply for soils not suited to lucerne or phalaris. While its importance will be considerably less than that of the latter two species, there may still be scope for significant sowings of Consol provided this is justified by future research findings and farmer experience.

A major barrier to adoption of Consol appears to be the lack of knowledge amongst farmers of its potential. A factor contributing significantly to this situation is the fact that Consol is not being promoted by agronomists. This is suggested by Table 1 and was confirmed by our conversations with agronomists. These attitudes are in turn linked to another barrier - the lack of a proven track record for Consol. Many farmers indicated they were reluctant to invest in sowings of Consol until they had seen it work successfully on a farm scale elsewhere. Sowing of commercial size demonstration plots, and production/dissemination of information packages that enable farmers to test Consol on a small scale, would appear to be the top priorities for the Consol lovegrass Program.

References

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