

# A 2005 snapshot of dryland farming management within the mid and lower Murrumbidgee catchment.

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## Introduction

When it comes to the management of natural resources such as soil and water, dryland farming systems are not immune to the pressure to improve their efficiency whilst minimising any detrimental impacts on the environment. Within the Murrumbidgee catchment of New South Wales, a study was conducted into existing dryland farming practices to gauge whether improvements can actually be made, or if current best management practices are already widely adopted. Results from the study have provided a benchmark from which research and extension efforts can be more effectively targeted, as well as enabling monitoring and evaluation of the impact of Murrumbidgee Catchment Management Authority (MCMA) activities and projects to occur.

## Methods

The instrument selected to carry out this study was a self-administered questionnaire which was mailed to recipients throughout the mixed farming zone of the mid and lower Murrumbidgee catchment. Questions related to current management practices of dryland cropping and/or farming operations, and were formulated in consultation with Community Service Officers from the MCMA, District Agronomists and other Department of Primary Industries (DPI) personnel with expertise in related fields.

## Results

A good response rate saw data collected from 700 landholders. What follows is only a small proportion of result highlights, chosen specifically as they give an indication of the pasture management opportunities and challenges that currently exist in the region.

- When it came to deciding on crop and pasture rotations, the three most important factors nominated by landholders were: (1) profitability; (2) paddock history; and (3) the provision of feed for as long as possible. One factor that consistently rated as being not at all important in this decision was the ability to minimise deep water loss (indicated by 20% of all respondents).
- Twenty-six percent of respondents indicated that all of their pastures were sown under a cover crop,

with a further 31% saying that a proportion of their pastures had been.

- Feed shortages were usually experienced during the three months of autumn, particularly April.
- Periods when feed was short were said to be overcome predominantly by supplementary feeding with both grain and hay or silage.
- Of the possible crops or pastures grown to fill a feed gap, oats was the most common; grown by 55% of all respondents. Grazing wheats had been grown by less than 40% for that purpose.
- Overall, just 21% of respondents said that they use fodder budgeting on their own farm.

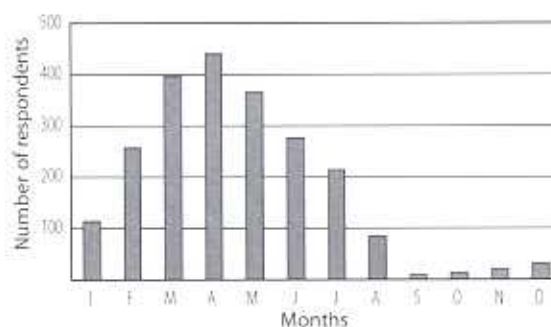


Figure 1 Months of the year when feed shortages are usually experienced in the Murrumbidgee catchment based on the response of 700 landholders.

## Discussion

Results from this study have enabled previous assumptions of landholder practices in the catchment to be challenged, and has established a useful benchmark from which to measure changes in the future. The true value of this undertaking will be realised when these results are used to influence the future direction of research, extension and on-farm practices throughout the Murrumbidgee catchment.

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