
MIXED FARMING FOR RESILIENCE

Charles Nason says the Grain & Graze program – with its aim to deliver an integrated package for the best management of crops and animals – will provide resilience and long-term sustainability to farming systems in the Maranoa/Balonne region of south west Queensland.

And he says that, while successful farming is already complex in the Maranoa Balonne, if climate change is to be believed the job is going to be even more challenging, and bring dramatic changes in enterprise mixes.

Mr Nason runs a 700 cow breeder herd and grows a range of grain and forage crops on Banoona, east of Roma, where he says “every paddock has a melon hole and a pine tree, meaning it is good grazing land but difficult farming”.

Melon holes are a naturally occurring phenomenon of depressions up to two metres deep surrounded by associated mounds. They are widespread in the Brigalow Belah belt of clay soils of Queensland and northern NSW and after good rains water can cover as much as 75 percent of the country.

Mr Nason is also chairman of the committee that supervises the combined operations of the Maranoa/Balonne regional component of the national Grain & Graze program and the Western Farming Systems project by Queensland’s Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries.

The Grain & Graze program is a collaborative partnership between Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA), Australian Wool Innovation (AWI), Land & Water Australia (LWA) and the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC).

It aims to help mixed farmers in nine regions around Australia increase profitability in both their cropping and livestock enterprises and simultaneously better manage natural resources.

The GRDC supports the long running Queensland component of the Western Farming Systems project with similar targets of improved profitability and sustainability in grain cropping.

“With its emphasis on the triple bottom line – economic, environmental and social benefits – Grain & Graze is the trend of things to come, a new way of doing business,” Mr Nason said.

“Credit for getting the Maranoa/Balonne region involved in Grain & Graze must go to Peter Knights, chairman of the South Queensland Beef Research Committee, who saw the need for research, development and extension for improved, intensive, forage systems for value adding in this region.

“The Maranoa/Balonne and the Border Rivers are unique among the nine Grain & Graze regions, in that they do not have a winter dominant rainfall and their mixed farmers tend to run beef cattle, not sheep.

“It was important for the northern beef industry that the region invest in the Grain & Graze project, as this is a key value adding area for the cattle industry. The region has a major store selling centre at Roma and also contains or is close to about half Australia’s feedlot capacity.”

Mr Nason said it made sense for the regional Grain & Graze program to collaborate with the GRDC Western Farming Systems project that was already operating successfully.

Factors which would change enterprise mixes in south west Queensland were the rise of interest in producing ethanol from grain and, possibly, the emergence of a new plateau in grain prices due to low world stocks, leading to a new increase in grain production.

Eventually final decisions about enterprises would rest on a mix of individual preferences, likes, comfort zones, management skills and finally “the hip-pocket nerve”.

Mr Nason himself, for instance, has put more emphasis on cropping over the last three years without reducing cattle numbers; he’s planted oats, dual purpose barley and forage sorghum, at times running half his stock on 10 per cent of his country which was cropped.

Sugargraze forage sorghum, an “old fashioned” variety which maintained good quality over its life, yet didn’t require the management of some newer lines, had been planted in September 2005 and provided 15 months of grazing.

In a well-managed, long term farming system, particularly one that could incorporate applications of nitrogen and other fertiliser, Sugargraze might provide even more grazing, maybe up to 18 months, and still retain its quality.

Barley is another crop Mr Nason believes is under-appreciated for grazing. He plants the dual-purpose Mackay variety, which he says can be grazed two months earlier than oats planted at the same time.

Barley appeared to establish faster than oats, which needed another fall of rain to develop secondary roots, which barley did not seem to need. Barley could go on to make hay or produce grain if not required for grazing stock and, Mr Nason believes, should be part of any winter forage system.

Mr Nason says woody weeds continued to be a problem and were of major concern to livestock producers and zero till farmers alike in the Maranoa Balonne.

However the biggest challenge would be to manage long and short term climate variability as well as the much debated climate change.

Possibly there would be a drier period and that was where Grain & Graze will come in with a resilient, mixed farming system that was environmentally and economically sustainable in the long term.

It is a question of whether the current generation, with its experiences of a wetter era, are prepared for the possibility of drier times.

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