

96/N04



## Producer Research Support

### Summer active pastures for highland districts

Tumbarumba BIA



#### The project

Strong perennial pasture is the basis of profitability in this highland district, and members of the Tumbarumba BIA gained both knowledge and confidence on the subject from a Producer Research Support project begun in 1994.

It also led to increased sowings of chicory as a perennial summer crop.

"There is no doubt we are much more aware of the acid soil problem and the associated constraint to production now," said Tumbarumba BIA president Tony a'Beckett, The Briars, Rosewood.

Mr a'Beckett said the increased amount of lime being spread in the district was testament to this. He said the project trials had established that there was a role for specialty chicory pasture provided soil conditions were favourable and the stand could survive for at least four years.

Results gained from chicory pasture sown on one farm were "very encouraging" on granite-based soil but lime was a vital input on the shale soils.

"At least four members of our group are going to put in chicory on the strength of our findings to date," Mr a'Beckett said.

#### Objectives

Evaluate a range of summer active perennial pastures.

#### What was done

The enthusiasm for chicory was (despite a cautionary tone) given to the group by Wagga-based consultant Dr David Sackett of Holmes Sackett and Associates. He led the group and other interested producers through a workshop on drought management of stock and pastures at Roger and Janet Anderson's property 'Burra' Tumbarumba, to 'set the scene' prior to the project to explore summer pastures for highland areas.

The group went through a hands-on assessment of condition scoring of cows, a discussion of various weaning strategies and the available pasture was inspected.

The inadequate spring rains, followed by a lesser number of summer storms than normal, highlighted the advantage of well fertilised perennial pasture over annual pasture.

Dr Sackett had earlier stressed the need for the farm to have an area of summer active pasture on which to wean spring calves. The economics of the annual summer fodder crop has been analysed by Holmes Sackett and found to be "monumentally unprofitable" when all costs have been properly allocated.

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#### Key points

- Growers are now more aware of the acid soil problem and the associated constraint to production.
- There is a role for specialty summer fodder crops such as chicory, provided they can survive for at least four years.

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## Producer Research Support

MLA Producer Research Support offers support funding of up to \$15,000 over three years for groups of producers keen to be active in on-farm research and demonstration trials.

These activities include:

- Producer Initiated Research and Development
- More Beef from Pastures demonstration trials
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## Meat and Livestock Australia

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Mr a'Beckett said this was contested by some members but there was general agreement at the end of the discussion that most farmers had not "faced up to the cold facts" of this impartial analysis.

"This realisation provides further incentive to find an alternative to the annual cultivation for one off summer crops," Mr a'Beckett said.

### Rainfall

Dr Sackett presented rainfall data and analysis which his organisation had compiled for the Tumbarumba district in relation to the El Nino and SOI effect.

He demonstrated that in years when the El Nino condition applied there was an above average chance of receiving higher than average rainfall in the autumn in this district and that the SOI was not a useful predictive tool for rain in southern Australia.

In Tumbarumba there was a greater than 82% probability of receiving more than 25mm of rain in April and 90% in May.

Despite the current conditions there was only a small chance of a disastrous season as pasture would grow at 10–20 kg/day through winter.

One of the main points to come out of the day was that a failure of spring rainfall in this district was infrequent but should it occur, stocking rate decisions should be made early.

"This was a very useful session which put the current situation in perspective and helped us all to make logical decisions about stocking rates in the months ahead," Mr a'Beckett said.

### Discussion

#### On farm trials

In one of the four on-farm trials Robert McEachern, Braeside, Wolseley Park-Munderoo renovated a degraded 20-year old phalaris pasture with Puna chicory (5 kg/ha) and haifa white clover (2 kg/ha).

The loam overlying yellow slate measured 4.1pH, an Olsen P (phosphorus) of eight in the top soil profile and 41% aluminium in the same soil band, lifting to 45% in the 10–20cm band.

Lime was applied at five tonnes/ha in early November after 2 litres glysofphate/ha was sprayed in the first week of September. The pasture was sown on November 21. It was stocked in early March 1997 with 300 lambs for 10 days, in April with two cows and calves for 24 days and 300 lambs for seven days; and again in May with one cow and calf for 19 days. Average stocking rate over the 180 days from presowing to the end of May was 17.3dse.

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## MLA also recommends BeefPlan

BeefPlan is a non-traditional approach to learning. Groups of like-minded beef producers, work together as a management team to focus on property management. Importantly the learning agenda is set and controlled by the group.

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The paddock was stocked with 87 first cross ewes and 106 lambs and two weaner calves for 21 days in September-October; the same 87 ewes and lambs for 17 days in November; one cow and three calves for 100 days between November and February with 20 six-month old lambs added in December; and 170 lambs for three days in March.

Average stocking rate over 314 days, between June 1997 and March 1998, was 15 dry sheep.

The pasture received 100 kg single super/ha in March 1997 (9 kgP/ha) and double this rate the following March.

Despite the dry spring and summer the plot sustained a stocking rate of 15 dse over the period since May 97.

There was a marked decline in plant density over the whole plot, particularly in the zero lime area.

The lower rate lime area still has an adequate number of plants according to the density recommended by Dr David Kemp (Orange Agricultural Institute) and the high lime area is well above that level for optimum production.

The haifa white clover did not survive the summer in a perennial form but there has been a reasonable germination of seed since the April rains.

The soil structure in the limed areas improved markedly and was supporting a significant earthworm population not present in the untreated area.

Both lime treatments had a dramatic effect on the aluminium level, reducing it from 41% to 6% and 1% respectively in the 0-10 cm soil depth band.

Mr McEachern is planning to sow another 4-8ha to chicory next spring and is progressively liming his property as a result of the trial.

## Fescue trial

Since our trials began, Pacific Seeds had established a Fescue trial in the area which BIA members have been following with great interest.

He said a specialist fescue pasture, with its ability to tolerate acid soils, would seem to be a lower cost and lower risk alternative summer pasture to chicory, but without the high fattening capabilities of the latter.

"This trial has built on the foundations of the PROGRAZE program and has brought home to us the absolute primacy of strong perennial pasture as the basis for profitability," Mr a'Beckett said.

## Intangible benefits

"One of the intangible benefits of this exercise has been the maintenance and expansion of our membership as others see that we are actively seeking information and answers to problems.

"We now have a cohesive group within which we can share information. This has had a morale boosting effect in very difficult times and we feel that through our contacts with consultants and our ability as a group to access the leading operators in the district we can have profitable enterprises."