

The adoption of pasture management practices in the Murray Mallee of South Australia

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The quality and productivity of pastures in the Murray Mallee have declined significantly in recent years. In response to this, the SA Department of Primary Industries has instigated a major extension program focusing on the management and improvement of pastures in this region. In collaboration with the Murray Mallee Soil Conservation Board and branches of the SA Agricultural Bureau. In order to develop an appropriate extension program, it was necessary to identify producer attitudes to pasture improvement and management. and those practices currently carried out.

Methods

A postal survey questionnaire was conducted amongst dryland primary producers in the Murray Mallee Soil Conservation District of SA in June 1992.

Results and discussion

Farmers in general were found to hold a favourable attitude towards pasture management and improvement, despite limitations in financial resources and the relative frequency of droughts experienced. Farmers recognised the benefits from growing quality pastures, but tended to be dissatisfied with their establishment and management efforts.

It is apparent that cropping frequencies are intensifying in this low rainfall region, with farmers endeavouring to increase their cash flow by increasing areas sown to cereal crops. Disease resistant cereals and grain legume crops have been utilised in some instances.

The management and improvement of pastures has tended to be undertaken in a haphazard manner, as a result of poor seasonal conditions, limited financial resources, and a failure to promote management practices on the basis of a farming systems perspective.

Poor weed control was considered to be the main agronomic factor limiting pasture production. Many producers failed to utilise proven cost-effective means of controlling weeds through the use of selective herbicides. It is necessary to develop appropriate strategies for controlling weeds in the context of the farming systems practised by producers in the Murray Mallee.

The survey identified the need to actively involve farmers in the development and instigation of participant-driven extension programs from a farming systems perspective, with dryland pastures serving as the focal point for group activities.

It is appropriate for the Department of Primary Industries to launch an appropriate action research orientated extension program directed towards the improvement and management of dryland medic based pastures in the Murray Mallee of SA.