

The value of hay in a cropping system - Is it all beer and skittles?

Greg Toomey, senior agronomist at Landmark Elmore, discussed the value of hay in a cropping system at the recent GRDC Grains Research Updates for Advisers in Ballarat.

The area sown to export oaten hay has expanded to the point where it is a significant part of farming systems in the Elmore - Colbinabbin area of north central Victoria. Greg says the area sown has grown on the back of the profitability it has added to farm businesses in the district.

“This is the main reason growers got into hay in the first place”, says Greg. “Hay gross margins among my clients are commonly between \$500 and \$1,200 per hectare.” These figures represent gross margins over a variety of GSR years. “In a decade which was characterised by numerous below average rainfall years, having a crop which didn’t require any rain or stored moisture beyond head emergence has been very beneficial”, says Greg.

From an agronomist’s point of view there are a number of reasons why hay can be an integral part in the long term viability of cropping systems. Some of the benefits include:

- Different options for weed control;
- Potential to act as a break crop;
- Opportunity to recover a higher value from the crop when grain yield is limited by a dry season, frost and/ or heat stress; and
- Earlier cash-flow.

The opportunity to control ryegrass, and other weed problems, is one of the main additional benefits. Greg explains that while many of his clients don’t have a significant ryegrass problem, if the ryegrass plant population is increasing in a paddock it will be sown to oats targeting the export hay market. Greg suggests that when the ryegrass numbers are high, the paddock needs consecutive years of

hay production to drive weed population down.

He also says that spraying regrowth after the hay is cut and removed from the paddock is essential if you are serious about reducing the population. “There is a 5 per cent weed tolerance allowed in export hay, so brome grass, wild oats and some broad leaf weeds that sneak through can all be cut too”, says Greg.

A trial conducted by Landmark at Elmore in 2008 looked at the disease and nutrition management packages required to produce oaten hay. The results from the trial illustrated the benefit of oaten hay as a dry season risk management tool.

- With over 180 mm of rain in December 2007 and January 2008, sowing began in mid-May 2008 with good stored soil moisture.
- There was only 178 mm of GSR, compared with an average of 308 mm.
- Hay yields ranged between 6.9 t/ha and 8.7 t/ha.
- Grain yields ranged between 0.9 t/ha and 1.16 t/ha.
- Extra workload and potential stress from mid October until the end of harvest.

Other than that, Greg’s clients probably spend less per hectare than average on herbicides, and most have come through the last ten years in a pretty strong financial position. There are many growers facing tough ryegrass situations, with the ability to continually crop some paddocks under threat. “I have clients in this situation too”, says Greg, “But they are only the growers who don’t, or can’t, grow hay.”

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