

Pastures for prosperity — Seeds forum.

5. The future for the seed industry — a grower's perspective

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I am a mixed-crop farmer near Tolga on the Atherton Tableland, who started in seed production as a sideline, which rapidly became a necessary part of my rotation system. I soon realised, after limited unsuccessful experience with legumes, that grass seed crops fitted better into both the local conditions and the rotational needs of my land, and concentrated on grass seed production. Believing that new cultivars promised more profit than old ones, I took up Solander setaria soon after its release, and it became my main seed crop during its early years. Solander took several years for its value to become accepted, during which time the market was limited. Then, as the market developed, other growers moved in to exploit it. For a while it commanded a premium price, but now supply generally meets demand, and it has to compete with other setarias in the market. Its price has inevitably fallen back to figures not much greater than those of Nandi and Kazungula.

I have also grown seed of older established cultivars, such as purple pigeon grass and signal grass, but prefer to plant new cultivars when available. New grasses have some disadvantages in that they have to prove themselves under grazing before the market fully develops, which both takes time and introduces the risk that they may not do so. The advantage is that the best prices tend to prevail in their early years.

My preference for new cultivars led me early into experience of proprietary lines protected by Plant Varietal Rights (PVR), first with Bisset and then with Dawson blue grasses. With this behind me, I can see that both growers and merchants were very inexperienced in handling and

negotiating the contractual arrangements that are a necessary part of PVR, and we both made mistakes. Contracts need to be carefully negotiated, and the grower needs to understand the implications of their terms completely. They provide him with some, though not total, security of sale, but they leave him without an alternative route for sale if the buyer's terms do not satisfy him. Contracts must remain negotiable as they expire and circumstances change.

The future success of PVR will depend on the way it is managed. Given good understanding on both sides, and the good grower-merchant relationship that develops from that, I feel I can live with PVR and contractual arrangements into the future. I think that more thought must be given to the way PVR licences are let, and wonder if more might be made of the system of syndicates by which a cultivar may be marketed by more than one merchant.

PVR can both encourage and suppress the widespread use of a new cultivar. Clearly, it provides incentives to licensees to promote proprietary lines and encourage their adoption. But it also allows them to manipulate a closed market to create artificial scarcity and high price. This occurs with at least one cultivar, and though there are provisions in the PVR Act to prevent it, they have not been invoked and are unlikely to be.

The crops I grow have given me some experience of seed certification. For these crops, I have always believed it to be an important part of quality control. In 1981, I visited the government seed testing laboratory at Indooroopilly for instruction in peanut testing and certification, and in that way, learnt that a great deal of expertise in the subjects existed. However, about 2 years ago, this laboratory was closed and a small section of it transferred to Gatton College where 2 staff attempt to do all the work, with seed certification being administered remotely from Brisbane. This resulted in a huge loss of expertise, and stopped further research into seed testing techniques, etc.

Similarly, at the crop-production end of certification, the service is conducted by less experienced officers. I have recently experienced lost sales due to both sampling problems and the amount of time taken to get results back. It seems that the system has fallen apart, and yet there is a necessity for field and header inspection if contamination between, for example, Dawson and Bisset or Topcut and Callide, is to be avoided. If standards are to be maintained for the future, reconstruction of seed certification will be necessary to avoid a possibly disastrous situation of seed contamination or substitution.

Another service that should be maintained is the network of local expertise in DPI. This affects me in various ways. The growing use of PVR lines means that merchants are more likely to promote their own lines than ones that are best suited to a particular purpose. We therefore need, more than ever, an impartial system of recommendation for pasture cultivars, such as that provided by the shrinking ranks of DPI extension staff. Also, each new line needs to be tested locally on a small scale for its seed-production capability and to develop production methods. We have recently seen the consequences of short-circuiting this system. At the same time, we have an absolute need for the continuation of the local

rough seed quality checking system that allows us to monitor our own harvest and cleaning operations. I realise that the "user pays" principle is fashionable, and that we may have to contribute more directly to services, but we have reached the point where more cuts in services would harm the industry.

A point about seed production that is important to red-soil farmers on the Atherton Tableland is that some form of grass break is an absolute necessity in the crop farming rotation. With it, the system is sustainable into the future; without it, production can only deteriorate. I know from experience the difference in terms of water penetration, run-off, and soil erosion between grass and continuous cropping.

As for the future, in order to continue to produce seed, I must be sure that I have a market for my product. I am concerned about the number of factors loaded against the broad-acre type of grass seed: low cattle prices and the continuing drought in target sales areas, the ban on timber clearing for new pastures, etc. I shortly have to make a decision between further sowings of grass seed or planting sugar cane, and I am far from certain which way I shall go. One has become an under-serviced industry and the other is a well-organised and serviced industry.