Light land development in the West Midlands

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ALTHOUGH it has not received the widespread publicity which has attended land settlement schemes on the south coastal plain some very successful light land development has taken place in the West Midlands during the past 10 years. Large areas of what was once unattractive scrub country are now carrying highly productive pastures and the progress made by Mr. J. W. White at Badgingarra is an example of what may be achieved in this district by using proven techniques.

The West Midlands area lies west of the Midland Railway between Mingenew in the north and Gingin in the south. It has an assured winter rainfall ranging from about 16 in. per annum in the north-east portion to over 30 in. in the south-west.

Complete settlement of the area has been delayed by the variability of the soil types and the occurrence of large areas of infertile deep sand, the difficulty of obtaining underground water at a reasonable depth, and the problems of transportation—but notwithstanding these handicaps a large area has been brought into production.

For successful development the settler must have a reasonable block, sufficient capital for its development and the necessary knowledge of light land development. As can be seen from the accompanying photographs Mr. J. W. White of Badgingarra has been successful in establishing good pastures of sub clover and Wimmera rye grass. He initially took up a block of 2,500 acres in 1952 and 2,200 had been cleared by 1957.

The land shown in the illustrations was fallowed to a depth of 4 to 5 in. with a heavy disc plough in July, 1953. (Most of the area was not previously burnt but better results were obtained on the burnt areas.) It was then ploughed back in September. In April, 1954, it was seeded with a disc drill sowing 40 lb. of Ballidu oats and 150 lb. copper and zinc super per acre. The oats yielded 24 bushels per acre. The stubble was then burnt and the area ploughed to a depth of 5 in. with a Chamberlain disc plough, and 40 lb. Ballidu oats, 6 lb. Dwalganup sub clover, ½ lb. Wimmera rye grass and 150 lb. super per acre were sown in April, 1955. The oats from this crop yielded 18 bushels per acre. In 1956 and 1957 the area was topdressed
with 120 lb. super per acre applied with a disc drill.

By efficient removal of the harsh native vegetation and the use of adequate dressings of superphosphate, Mr. White has successfully established highly productive pastures. The soil types on this block represent some of the better types of heath plain soils. Most of the block is sand over clay at 3 to 24 in. below the surface, or sand over gravel at similar depths. There are also restricted areas of heavier land carrying york-gum and white-gum. Champion Bay poison occurs on the sand over clay association.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a number of fundamental principles which must be observed in the successful development of light land. These are—

(1) The settler must make sure that the block is worth developing before any work is done. Blocks with large areas of deep white or grey sand should be avoided.

(2) He must make sure that he has sufficient capital to finance efficient development and provide a living if he has no other income until the block becomes productive.

(3) He must have a good plant based on a heavy disc plough, a big tractor and a disc drill.

(4) All working should be done very efficiently. The native scrub should be completely removed by burning and at least two ploughings given before the first crop is sown. Cropping should be carried out on good clean fallow in order to get a crop which will provide a clean stubble burn which in turn will help to control regrowth and poison.

(5) Fertiliser application should be heavy in the initial years so that the pasture will get away to a good start and produce a bulk of feed. About one bag of copper-zinc-super per acre should be used in the first year.

(6) Development should be planned progressively for several years ahead so that it can be carried out in such a manner that it never places too great a strain upon the settler's physical and financial resources.