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T C. Stoneman

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WINTER MANAGEMENT OF SALT LAND

By T. C. STONEMAN, Research Officer, Soils Division

With the emergence of crops, many farmers will again be seeing bare patches or thin stands of cereals due to salt accumulation. Would these areas be better left out of cultivation, or should they have been planted to saltbush and bluebush?

When treating salt land there are three basic steps which should be followed:
- Fencing.
- Cultivation.
- Seeding.

FENCING

All salt-affected areas, except those only slightly affected or of awkward shapes such as along the sides of creeks, should be fenced out. This enables these areas to receive separate and lighter grazing than the adjacent unaffected areas.

Thought should be given to fencing out the salt-affected areas in the crop. The problem areas will then be ready to treat next season.

CULTIVATION

Both experience and experiment have shown that it is dangerous to fallow land that is either salt-affected or potentially so. Potentially salt-affected areas include all soils known to be underlain by a water-table at less than six feet, and certain soils of the outer wheatbelt with very salty subsoil and no watertable. Examples...
of these soils are the powdery or fluffy morrel soils.

Fallowing is undesirable because it eliminates plant growth—and by so doing it increases the possibility of salt rising to the soil surface during the spring months.

Farmers who have to prepare fallow this winter should keep in mind the disadvantage of fallow on salt-affected and potentially salt-affected areas.

**Autumn cultivation**, as distinct from fallowing, is generally good treatment for salt-affected land. Here, the aims of cultivation are threefold—

1. To break up the surface of the soil to allow early winter rains to soak in. This leaches the salt down into the soil, leaving a relatively salt-free layer at the surface for germinating seeds.
2. To roughen the soil surface so that windblown seeds may be trapped on the problem area during the summer.
3. Autumn cultivation must never be done after the volunteer plants have germinated. It should be an early cultivation to give a rough surface without killing any weeds.

**SEEDING**

**What to Sow**

Slightly affected land should grow cereals with early Wimmera ryegrass. This should be planted as a scratched-in crop. Oats, barley and cereal rye are more salt-tolerant than wheat.

Areas too severely affected to be sown with cereals should be sown to salt-tolerant perennial plants. Bluebush, Old Man Saltbush and Creeping Saltbush are available commercially and have been sown by many farmers in the wheatbelt with considerable success.

It would be a good idea to plan next year’s seed requirements for your salt land now, and place your order early.

**IN BRIEF**

- Now is a good time to give some thought to the fencing of salt-affected country. Until these areas are fenced off attempts to improve them will not be successful.
- Salt-affected areas and potentially affected areas should not be fallowed.
- Decide what plants to establish on the areas next year and place an order now.

If in doubt about how to tackle a salt problem, ask your local agricultural adviser.

—from an A.B.C. Radio Talk.

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Without Earth Ring</td>
<td>21 ft.</td>
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