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New strains of subterranean clover : prospects and problems for the seed producer

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NEW STRAINS OF SUBTERRANEAN CLOVER

Prospects and problems for the seed producer

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THREE new strains of Subterranean clover—Daliak, Seaton Park and Uniwager—have been released. In Western Australia, in other States and perhaps some overseas countries, the next few years will see many farmers or graziers summing up the merits and demerits of these strains and subsequently making a decision to change or not to change their present strains.

Most farmers will have a relatively easy task in deciding which strain to sow. They will take in what the radio and press has to say and they may also attend a few field days to make first hand observations. Most of this decision making will take place in one or two years time when more information is available and seed is expected to be cheaper.

The farmer who is also a seed producer has a much more difficult decision to make. He needs to know now what the non seed producing farmers will be seeking in two years' time. No answer can be provided with a high degree of confidence, but it is possible to give some guidance by setting out the factors likely to influence the position.

The current position

For the two years 1965/66 and 1966/67 the level of subterranean clover seed production in Western Australia was reasonably stable at about 8,700 tons. This figure represented some 75 per cent of the total Australian production in those years. The current 1967/68 season does not have the same pattern, while the production in Western Australia should be about 8,000 tons it is likely to represent over 90 per cent. of the total Australian crop, for the drought of 1967 has reduced potential yields in the Eastern States from a "normal" 3,000 to 4,000 tons to about 300 tons.

As a rule about one sixth of the Western Australian seed crop is sold in other States or overseas. Some seed sold to merchants in other States eventually finds its way overseas.

In fact, very little of this seed sold to overseas countries is actually shipped from Western Australian ports. Most export seed is shipped from Melbourne or Sydney the main importing countries being Uraguay, New Zealand, Chile, United States, Spain and Portugal. In 1966/67 a total of 1,100 tons, mainly the Mt. Barker, Woogenellup, Clare and Yarloop strains was sold overseas.

From the figures quoted it is clear that some 80 per cent. of the seed produced is also sown in Western Australia. Therefore it is the local market which is of greatest importance to seed producers.

Seed utilisation in Western Australia

Although accurate figures are not available it appears that some 60 to 70 per cent. of the seed used within the State is either the Dwalganup. or Geraldton strains, mainly the latter. Most of the remainder is Woogenellup with the other seven strains (Yarloop, Clare, Mount Barker, Bacchus Marsh, Dinninup, Howard and Tallarook)

accounting for only some 10 per cent. of the total.

In terms of maturity groups there is nothing to suggest that the present position will alter in the next few years. The strains with an early maturity at or close to that of Geraldton or Dwalganup will remain most in demand.

Supply and demand

Subterranean clover seed is sold on a completely open market and as such is subject to the natural laws of supply and demand, with price as a balancing factor. Therefore, the factors which influence both supply and demand are of importance to the seed producer for they determine the price he will be offered for his product.

The potential supply

Western Australia is in a particularly good position to produce subterranean clover seed on a large scale; in fact it is in a much better position than any other State.

Each year some 1,000,000 acres of new land is cleared, much of it along the south coast where the growing season is six or seven months. High yields are possible on this new land and the large, open gently undulating paddocks are ideal for the operation of air draught harvesting machines.

There are no technical limitations to the supply of seed being substantially increased in a short time, if there is sufficient demand at a profitable price.

Demand for seed

The potential buyer of seed needs to be satisfied in the first instance that planting subterranean clover or any other available pasture species will increase the profitability of his farm. Not all farmers are convinced of this. Western Australia still has only a little more than one third of the total cleared area sown to improved pasture.

Under normal circumstances the introduction of a new improved strain or strains could be expected to stimulate demand, for it is a reasonable assumption that at least some of the previously unconvinced farmers would change their minds and start planting improved pastures.

The question of purchasing power is of course of vital importance. In broad terms in Western Australia the purchasing power of potential buyers fluctuates with returns from wool and wheat. Over the last few years wool prices have fallen and there is obviously reduced finance available for further development, which includes seed purchases.

In districts where wool production predominates—the south coast, the wetter districts of the central and southern agricultural regions, and parts of the South-West—the demand for pasture seed could fall. To balance this likely fall it is fortunate that the strains being sown in these medium rainfall regions are also those sold in quantity to other States and overseas where the demand for seed is not so sensitive to wool price movements.

The main demand for seed in Western Australia comes from the lighter rainfall districts (14-20 inch) and in these districts wheat production predominates. Increased acreages sown to cereals and good seasons have maintained the purchasing power of potential seed buyers and there is little to suggest that this position will not continue. Possibly with the diminished relative importance of wool production there would be less incentive to sow legume pastures, but feed value is by no means the only attribute of a legume pasture. They also increase soil nitrogen for subsequent wheat crops, maintain soil structure, and prevent erosion.

New strains and important strains

Although three new subterranean clover strains have been released this does not infer that they will be the only strains used in the future. At least two of the present strains, Geraldton and Woogenellup, are likely to retain an important but probably not a completely dominating position.

Geraldton

About 4,000 tons of Geraldton is produced annually. The Daliak strain will make substantial inroads into this market particularly in the 15 to 20 inch cereal and sheep districts. In the lighter rainfall districts the choice will be between Geraldton and Uniwager. Clover disease is not a major problem in these districts and

Geraldton appears the superior strain in other respects.

Overall it would be reasonable to anticipate a gradually declining demand for Geraldton over the next five years to almost one third its present level.

Uniwager

Uniwager is unlikely to be grown in preference to Daliak in the 15 to 25 inch rainfall districts. In the lighter rainfall districts it will have to compete with Geraldton, a formidable opponent where clover disease is not a problem.

Daliak

More extensive testing of Daliak is planned for the next few years and providing this does not reveal any hidden faults this strain is likely to largely replace both Geraldton and Dwalganup.

A demand for Daliak rising to about 3,000 tons each year could be anticipated.

Seaton Park

Seaton Park, with a maturity close to that of Dinninup, is not likely to have the same wide scope as Daliak in terms of potential utilisation. In addition, it will be competing with Daliak on the drier margin and Woogenellup in the wetter areas.

Seaton Park will be sown mainly in sheep raising districts at present feeling the effect of lower wool prices and this combined with other factors suggests a demand at a level about one quarter that of Daliak.

Woogenellup

In 1966/67 some 3,000 tons of Woogenellup seed was harvested in Australia. It is sown in Western Australia mainly in sheep raising districts where the rate of development may stabilise or perhaps slow down over the next few years. On the other hand, a substantial proportion of the Western Australian harvest each year is sold to other States and overseas where demand is not so susceptible to wool price fluctuations. If there has been a trend in these markets over the last few years it is a steady but somewhat erratic expansion.

Overall it appears that the next few years will see the demand for Woogenellup remaining fairly constant at its present level.

Concluding comments

While wool prices remain at their present levels the total demand for pasture seed is not likely to increase, at the best it will remain fairly constant. The next few years will see rapid changes in demand for the different strains of subterranean clover in particular, but highly profitable returns will be the exception rather than the rule.

Seed producers should keep in mind that production of any one species or strain can be increased many times over in the space of a year. An undersupply and high prices can be followed the next year by an oversupply and a spectacular fall in prices.

Production of certified subterranean clover seed in the Australian States 1966-67

Strain	Production (tons)				
	W.A.	N.S.W.	Vic.	S.A.	Total
Geraldton	2,417	....	....	....	2,417
Dwalganup	124	231	....	....	355
Yarloop	465	2	....	22	489
Dinninup	69	....	....	....	69
Woogenellup	1,249	944	56	28	2,277
Clare	56	....	....	33	89
Bacchus Marsh	22	19	56	....	97
Howard	13	7	68	15	103
Mt. Barker	161	1,416	94	177	1,848
Tallarook	1	26	....	....	27
TOTAL	4,577	2,645	274	275	7,771

Pasture seed production in Western Australia 1966-67

	Tons
Clovers	
Subterranean	8,780
Rose	435
Cupped	111
Strawberry	22
Bladder	2
Medics	
Barrel	1,093
Strand (Harbinger)	73
Snail	2
Lupins	260
Serradella	110
Rye grass	
Wimmera	131
Perennial	6
Cocksfoot	6
Puccinellia	4
Veldt grass	6

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