

Pasture cropping pioneer Col Seis receives Bob Hawke Landcare Award

ABC Rural Sally Bryant, Michael Cavanagh and Michael Condon

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PHOTO: Landcare award recipient, farmer Colin Seis, has been using native perennial grasses in his cereal crops on his Gulgong, NSW, farm since 1993. He says there are big economic and ecological benefits from farming this way. Read more. (Supplied: Graeme Hand)

A farmer from Gulgong in central west NSW has been recognised for his contribution to conservation at the National Landcare Conference awards dinner in Melbourne.

In the early 1980s, Colin Seis started to experiment with sowing cereal crops into native pastures, a practice that has come to be known as 'pasture cropping'.

In 1979 following a devastating bushfire that destroyed his Gulgong farm, killing 3,000 sheep, Col knew he had to try something different.

"I was broke and I had to come up with a farming system that didn't cost anything to set up," he said.

So he instituted a pasture cropping program for his grazing enterprise that has now been exported overseas to thousands of farmers.

He says he program is cheaper without the fertiliser, the sheep do better and the wool quality is improved.

But Col Seis says the big winner is his land and the soil.

Over the ensuing decades, what was an experimental idea has been increasingly adopted by other farmers and been hailed by international crop scientists.

"These techniques can be adopted anywhere and they are being adopted all around the world and there is nothing complicated or difficult about it and it can certainly generate good incomes while they regenerate our farms really," he said.

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AUDIO: Landcare award accolades flowed from a bushfire disaster says Gulgong farmer Col Seis (ABC Rural)

MAP: Gulgong 2852

The benefits of pasture cropping include weed control, stabilising soil erosion, increased soil carbon levels and the production of nutrient-dense, healthy food.

Mr Seis says the gathering at the Landcare dinner was enormous, estimating the crowd to be in excess of 800 people.

"It's good to see the support is still there, still strong despite the funding pressure that Landcare is under."

Landcare's success has varied, with some branches struggling for numbers while others have effectively managed the weed problem.

This is certainly the case in the Towamba Valley, west of Eden on the New South Wales far south coast, where the local branch believes it is handling the problem of weeds such as the serrated tussock quite well.

Formed 20 years ago, it has been actively managing serrated tussock for 15 of those years, and it's members are confident they are on the right track.

This is probably due to the 60 financial members meeting frequently to swap ideas and work together in tackling the problem.

This was the case on the day Landcare celebrated its 25th year, with 41 landholders and officers from the Bega Valley Shire Council and National Parks and Wildlife Service gathered to report how the battle was faring.

Many observed that a big plus was the part time employment of Derek Lewis, a local farmer to co-ordinate activities.

His work was financed by State Government funding.

This has been boosted by working with the local Indigenous land council, contracting workers to help manage the weeds.

A number have gone on to secure other work in the area with landholders they have come into contact with through the local Landcare scheme.

Local cattle producer Peter Mirams, who has farmed the area for more than four decades, says greater co-ordination and a realisation of the problem has played a major part in the local branch's success.

"There is a greater appreciation of the problem, more of a general consciousness of the effect of weeds and also a much greater appreciation of a united front in controlling them.

"Strong leadership got the movement going and since then people seeing the results and realising that it is not just your own individual problem spurs you on to being able to manage it."

Mr Mirams' work to control the problem over the years has also included his seven children.

One daughter's experience in London, when it came to serrated tussock, did bring a chuckle from those gathered at the olive plantation when he recounted her experience.

While visiting a nursery, she sent a photo of a pot of one serrated tussock plant selling for \$17.

Tongue-in-cheek, a number of fellow producers wondered aloud whether they should scrap their ventures and instead export the weed.

"Exporting my tussock to Britain may be a bit over the top. Even though it may be a good idea, the exercise may be a bit more of a strain than spraying the tussocks," Mr Mirams laughed.

Topics: sustainable-and-alternative-farming, pasture, conservation, gulgong-2852, dubbo-2830, towamba-2550, bega-2550, melbourne-3000

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