



Sprouting success

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DROUGHT and the cost of supplementary feed can cause severe economic problems for many farmers. Increasingly, summers are becoming hotter and dryer for longer periods. The ability to maintain good feed through these times of stress is becoming more difficult.

Some farmers have turned to sprouting grain hydroponically to ensure a supply of nutritious, green feed. There was a wave of interest in the early 1980s and many people experimented with temperature and moisture controlled rooms to maximise production.

Nutritionally, sprouted grain offers animals a rich source of vitamins not found in the whole grain. Vitamin A and vitamin C, two very important vitamins needed for healthy growth and production in all animals, are found in high levels in sprouts.

The protein level of young sprouts is also very high. Independent dairy trials using sprouted fodder have shown a 10 per cent increase in milk production and a 14pc higher butter fat content when compared with controls.

The advantages of feeding young, actively growing grass to animals is well known by all farmers. The ability to produce good feed during the whole year offers the potential to operate a drought-proof property and use seasonal variation as an economic advantage rather than a disadvantage.

With an emphasis on reducing nutrient loadings in wastewater streams, there is an opportunity to use wastewater for producing good sprout growth. I am currently doing trials with the liquid fraction of dairy wastewater and the results are very promising with good, healthy looking sprout growth.

Dairy farmers, in Queensland particularly, face difficulty during spring and autumn in producing adequate green feed to maintain good milk production. It is during this time that sprouting could be very useful.

There is also the opportunity to use sprouted grain to fatten store cattle, at a time when good quality cattle demand a premium price.

A deer farmer in central NSW, faced with drought and the

accompanying high price of bought in feed, took a long hard look at sprouting fodder for his herd and produced a fully automated, low labour system.

His system means that, irrespective of the weather conditions, he has nutritious feed available for his animals all year round. It's a way to reduce some of the stress which is part of present-day farming.

He uses a closed system which allows him to control temperature and humidity for optimum plant growth. The system can produce a tonne of green feed from an area not much bigger than a double garage.

Careful use of insulation reduces the high costs of heating and cooling, and an automatic watering system conserves precious water.

Economically, there are initial capital costs, but these could be recouped within a couple of years due to increased farm output. Daily running costs are very low, due to an automated sprinkler system. And only two hours labour a day is needed to maintain the system and put the fodder out for the animals.

Fodder production is improved by using low levels of nutrients to the spray water. These nutrients can be supplied either by inorganic salts such those used for hydroponic production. An option with environmental advantages is to use wastewater from another farming enterprise.

Dairy farming and fish farming are two enterprises which would integrate very well with fodder production.

Because of the small space required for fodder production, the practicality of feeding animals for food and fibre production closer to urban development can become a reality.

The usual land degradation associated with too many animals on too small an area is no longer an issue, and animal competition from not enough food is not a problem.

It is so important to look at farm waste streams and see where they can be used as resources for another enterprise. All waste can become a food source for another plant or animal.

Recycling all resources on a farm can add to the profitability of a farming business, and in the longer term help create a business which is both sustainable and gentle on the environment.

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