

MARATALA

west of Coomandook
Peter, Annie and Alistair Ifould

Location: Malinong, west of Coomandook, Upper South East, South Australia
Size: 5500ha (13,500 acres)
Rainfall: 425mm per year
Soil Types: 2630ha (6,500 acres) of deep non-wetting sands, steep sandhills, pH7, fertility is naturally low - used for pastures
2830ha (7000 acres) of red loamy sands and limestone flats for cropping.
Stock: 9,500 Self replacing merino flock, 80 cattle

• Reasons for Lucerne

Lucerne is grown on the Ifould property for a number of reasons. Firstly the excellent feed it provides for both sheep and cattle, especially over summer and then in autumn when annual pastures and stubbles are not available. Hand feeding is reduced to a minimum or not at all, depending on stock numbers and the season.

Secondly, the steep sandhills will not support a continuous cropping or cropping/medic rotation but cover must be maintained over summer/autumn to prevent erosion. Lucerne provides permanent cover preventing wind erosion of large portions of the property.

Thirdly, lucerne makes better use of groundwater and nutrients inaccessible to annual crops and pastures. The sandhills are a recharge zone for groundwater for other areas of the Upper South East and the Ifoulds believe that this water should be used while it is available, instead of contributing to dryland salinity away from their own property.

• Paddock History

The Ifoulds use the same preparation for all their lucerne paddocks as it has proven itself in all climate conditions, from wet winters and dry springs through to drought and wet years. Their 'secret' is to give the lucerne the best chance of success by reducing moisture competition between the lucerne and all other plants including cover crops.

Year One

The paddock is spraytopped with Gramoxone for grass control.

Year Two

A barley crop is grown using Trifluralin for sand fescue control and later a broadleaf herbicide for capeweed, primrose and other weeds. The cropping also helps the soil wet up better than spraytopping for two years and less insects are harboured by the weed free cereal than a grassy pasture or weedy crop paddock. The barley is harvested as high as possible and left anchored over summer. The stubble is only lightly grazed as this will provide the wind erosion protection during the establishment year.

Year Three

The paddock is sprayed as late as possible to control sand fescue with Glyphosate and insecticide and sown a week later in late July/early August. The lucerne is direct drilled into the barley stubble at 4kg/ha. The seed is inoculated, treated with Le Mat, lime pelleted and a fungicide dressing is also being tried. No particular fertiliser rate or type is used at sowing and press wheels are used to gain seed-soil contact. Insects, especially pink cutworm and red legged earth mite are monitored continually and there are no delays or hesitations with insecticide applications if outbreaks occur. Monitoring and fast action helped save 'Drive Paddock' in 1995 from being decimated by pink cutworm.

Years following

The lucerne is generally first grazed the following autumn unless there have been good summer rains. The paddock is top dressed with 100kg of single super each year and trace elements added according to soil and plant tissue tests.

Stocking rates possible in this country on lucerne are approximately 4.5 DSE/ha per year or higher, especially where paddocks are smaller and stock can be controlled easily, compared to 1 to 1.5 DSE/ha on sand fescue or weedy pastures.