

Pasture improvement Overgrazing slows recovery

Farmers learn to spot native grass

By JACINTA ROSE

ACCURATE identification is the first step towards improving native grass populations in pastures, according to native grass expert Millie Nicholls, Brinkworth.

Ms Nicholls helped Barossa graziers develop their identification skills at a field day in Keyneton last month, visiting properties affected by the damaging Eden Valley fires.

She said the field day was timed to make it easy to spot the often elusive native grass species.

"It's easy to tell the native grasses in those areas from the non-natives in that most of the non-natives are annual grasses, and most of the natives are perennials," Ms Nicholls said.

"Most of the year, to the average person, the native grasses probably look fairly similar. Now is the best time because grasses are out in head and easy to identify.

Key points

- Important to identify species
- Diversity increases animal nutrition
- Rotational grazing brings benefits

"Improving pastures is a matter of farmers learning which native grasses they've got – because some grow in summer and some grow in winter – and then monitoring those plants and then giving them the best chance to do their thing and grow."

The 26 graziers, stakeholders and natural resource officers attending the field day visited two local grazing properties.

Ms Nicholls was pleased to find wallaby and spear grass species in good numbers.

"There was good grass diversity, but the things that are missing are the herbs and the forbs – the small native broadleaf plants," she said.

"In a good-quality native grassland there're lots of native broad-

leaf plants as well as grasses, but they're mostly missing from those areas. There're some there but not a lot."

Diversity in pastures meant sheep and cattle could consume a more complete diet, often resulting in improved growth rates.

"The more diversity you have, the better your animals will do," she said.

She said areas that had been used solely for grazing purposes were likely to have higher native grass numbers.

"In any area that is non-arable, you'll nearly always find the native grasses left there. If it's been ploughed at any stage, usually it takes a long time to come back," Ms Nicholls said.

Overstocking or continual grazing could negatively impact native grass species, and rotational grazing and periods of rest were considered essential.

"All the native grasses that you find in this region are perennial grasses – they can't be grazed continually," she said.

"They've got to have some rest to allow them to regrow from their root systems. It's like lucerne management – they should be grazed, given time to grow and then grazed again.

"The practice in most regions is to put animals in and leave them there, often during the winter when they've only got the non-arable paddocks to put them in, and then they'll run them on stubbles over summer.

"Not a lot of people rotationally graze. To really manage them well, you've got to have lots of paddocks, but not many people have lots of paddocks any more."

She said using temporary electric fencing could assist with rotational grazing where graziers only had a few large paddocks, but this was time-consuming to set up and ensuring stock had water access in all segregated areas could be expensive.

Farmers were encouraged to



CLOSE LOOK: Millie Nicholls examines a native plant on a Barossa Improved Grazing Group field day at Keyneton.

focus on giving native grasses the best chance to flourish – an effort that did not necessarily involve extensive weed control programs.

"Weeds like Salvation Jane, geranium, silver grass and barley grass love bare ground so you're always going to get them," Ms Nicholls said.

"You can't get too tied up with the fact you've got lots of weeds. Sheep will eat those weeds, and anything is better than bare ground.

"My advice is don't go and spray your weeds. Let your sheep just eat them, but still monitor the plants that you want and don't worry about the weeds.

"Give the plants you want the best chance to do their thing and you'll gradually get back to a more native grass-filled pasture."

She said planting imported grass species such as phalaris in soils like those found in the Keyneton hills was unlikely to bring big benefits.

Patience aids recovery

NATIVE grass expert Millie Nicholls has emphasised the importance of patience when trying to return fire-ravaged grazing country to production.

She said graziers should keep stock off burnt land for as long as possible to give native grasses and broadleaf plants the best chance to repopulate.

"It takes a while, but if farmers manage their grazing well, the plants will reappear," she said.

Plants such as perennial native grasses may survive a fire, but early grazing of fresh shoots may be too much for the plant to handle.

"The plants would've had all their top burnt off and they're just back to roots, and if they've got little green shoots coming up

and the animals come along and eat those shoots, they haven't got enough energy left in their roots to regrow," Millie said.

"Resting is essential for the survival of the plants they've already got, and if they get a rain, it's important for the survival of any plants that germinate."

After visiting fire-affected areas, she said she was impressed by the recovery of damaged pastures.

"One of the good things is that after that burn, there was a good rain while it was still warm," Millie said.

"That's when you get a good germination of young plants. Because the farmers rested it, it gives those young plants a chance to grow again."



GET INVOLVED: Graziers at the Keyneton field day received advice on identifying native grass species in their paddocks.

Behind the headline

GRAZIERS are being encouraged to have a say in the Marginal to Mainstream project at a workshop in the Keyneton Hall to be hosted by Natural Resources SA Murray-Darling Basin on Thursday, November 27, from 7.30pm. The workshop will focus on constraints surrounding maintaining and improving grasses on grazing properties in the Keyneton and Truro areas. Project manager Elisa Sparrow said the work focused on declining grazing country. "The aims are to demonstrate feasible and repeatable methods of grazing and grassy understorey management, improve soil stability, pastoral resilience and biodiversity while assisting the farming community to implement positive change and improve productivity," she said.

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