

NZ GRASSLAND ASSOCIATION

Fuelled by Science, Tempered by Experience

GRASSLAND NEWS

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Thoughts from the President

Jacqueline Rowarth

Agribusiness professionals make a difference. From farm to flavour, we are all working to create a desirable product from a well-managed property – from the broad landscape, through the animal-plant-soil-environment interaction and up through the value chain. It's our story – efficient, effective and sustainable production, noting that sustainable includes financial viability as well as protection of resources.

One of the great things about the New Zealand Grassland Association is that agribusiness professionals are in it together. At the Gisborne Conference, managed superbly by Graham Johnson and his team, seeds, weeds and feeds (for soil, plant and animal) people were able to interact. The need was for information transfer – what are the problems, how can we address them, what outcomes do we want? Farmers, consultants, industry personnel and researchers talked about the issues and the latest results.

It was ever thus.

Past presidents John Caradus and Warwick Catto have reminisced and in doing so have highlighted the importance of NZGA and the interaction it facilitates.

Anders Crofoot, retiring President, has similarly emphasised the value of NZGA. One of the roles is in acting as a conduit for thoughts about a better world. This year Anders grasped a metaphorical bull by the horns, and used his Presidential address to speak out about the importance of research farms as well as on-farm research. He suggested that the trend towards models and surveys might have swung too far away from production. Although not everybody agrees about types of research, there is certainly a concern across the primary production sector about loss of research farms, reduction in what appears to be independent research, and increasing confusion about which organisation is fitting where in the chain of information flow.

Should Levy Bodies such as DairyNZ, Beef and Lamb and FAR have the role of on-farm research and Monitor Farms, responding directly to the stated desires of farmers? Should the universities and CRIs concentrate on long-term research with a view to the future as well as monitoring for unintended consequences? Should the consultants be doing the integration of the research information for the local area? With the field officers from the various seed, fertiliser and 'cide companies, would they be a robust platform for technology adoption?

The major problem with that as a model is the potential isolation of the University and CRI researchers from the on-farm problems – but ensuring that isolation doesn't occur is, of course, exactly the role of NZGA, in addition to the monitor farms and field day interaction.

At the NZGA conference it was excellent to hear the on-farm issue discussion during the field days. Of particular note was the visit to Papratu where the discussion was led by AgFirst consultant Rob Hayes. He was able to solicit involvement directly from the locals; this resulted in wide contribution and great discussion.

Graham and his team gave us a great conference. The weather was warm on the two days required, a shining cuckoo was heard, the Marae experience was a memorable experience, the food and wine were delicious and the timing was spot on.

Our collective thanks have been expressed to the Gisborne organisers and the new Local Organising Committee is already up and running – dates for Gore next year (6-8th November) to be noted in diaries. Theme: Opportunities in land use change.

Our thanks have also been expressed to Jeremy Savage and Pat Garden, departing the National Executive. Pat has been a constant source of calm advice based on experience – tempered by time. The location of the next conference means that he has not escaped the clutches of NZGA, and, indeed, he didn't try very hard.

Anders Crofoot stepped down as President, but will be with us for the coming year as he juggles farming and Federated Farmers responsibilities. NZGA has benefitted from his knowledge and interest plus the ongoing support of Emily, his wife. Our thanks to both.

As the new President I am very aware of the work of those that have gone before, as well as those that are with me now. The team is strong. The different backgrounds and perspectives brought by Ashley Cole, Laurie Copeland, Anders Crofoot (IPP), Graham Kerr, Warren King, Warwick Lissaman (VP) and David Stevens ensure that there will be no ivory tower isolations.

NZGA is about ideas and information flowing in all directions.

Spread the word...



NZGA celebrates 80 years

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Reflections on 80 years of NZGA

John Caradus (President 2007-2009)

The relevance and need for the New Zealand Grassland Association, has never been more important than it is today. The environment in which we operate may have changed from when we started, eighty years ago in the early 1930s, but as an organisation the value we create contributes significantly to the economic and social well-being of the entire nation.

NZGA contributes significantly to:

Highlighting new technologies and information that will improve productivity, biosecurity, feed supply options, envi-

ronmental integrity, energy use efficiency, and the opportunity to create new added value products; Maintaining high objective standards of scientific debate and scrutiny; Providing opportunities for debate and interaction between the groups that make up our membership – farmers, extension specialists, agribusiness and scientists (this is our competitive edge as an organisation).

As an association we have an impressive legacy. NZGA plays a significant role in synthesising information and creating learning opportunities for all our members.



Warwick Catto (President 2004 –2005)

When asked to reflect on the Grassland Association I think of my earliest years in the fertiliser industry and the key role the conference played in my technical training and establishing farming networks. In my view, 22 years on, this has not changed except the networking becomes more valuable. As a consequence of my experience, and the importance of those networks in particular, I encourage new staff to join and hope that they carry that membership with them during their working lives.

As a manager of research funding at Ballance, the NZGA conference provides a valuable forum to have our science peer reviewed and communicated within a key group of scientists, extension agents and also farmers. This scrutiny of science, and especially of commercially orientated work, is an important role that NZGA must continue with and foster. Our company values the endorsement that comes with publication. Perhaps more pressure should go on companies by the farmer members and others to have product claims published in a forum like this so as the correct scrutiny can be given.

The hosting of the conference in the smaller centres differentiates it from other conferences, especially when combined with the field trips. For many it is the first or only chance to get a perspective of the local region where often we are remotely developing products or providing advice. It also reminds me of the 'introducing the region paper' presented at the start of each conference, and with the return interval to a region or centre of up to 20 + years they serve

as a valuable time capsule of the state of agriculture at a point in time.

The major challenge I found when on the executive is how to keep the conference fresh and relevant. As I grow older and greyer I recognise that the essential elements described above will stay the same and really significant change is not needed.

However a realisation of the re-importance of agriculture has emerged in Wellington, the need for basic agronomy and soil science skills which were severely eroded during the 1990s has to be rebuilt. The establishment of the MAF Primary Growth Partnership funding vehicle is stimulating an increase in agriculture research and extension and perhaps may aid the rebuilding of this capability. But the NZGA must ensure that it is used and becomes a critical part of the validation and extension of the output of those programmes and so touches the many leading individuals and organisations that attend the conference.

The NZGA conference is held in high regard and relies on the support of many volunteers and the goodwill amongst competing companies to ensure the conference continues through both the sponsorship and attendance and participation in sessions. It is this collegiality and overall goodwill amongst the primary sector that makes this conference one of the most enjoyable, and for me, like an annual agricultural family reunion. I am sure that as long as this feeling remains amongst the core of the conference attendees its future will remain strong.

Powering Innovation, the report on improving access to and uptake of R&D in the high value manufacturing and services sector, is terrific. Professor John Raine, Professor Mina Teicher and Philip O'Reilly have done a great job for the country and the Ministry of Science and Innovation was right to commission an independent report.

Powering Innovation explains the importance of high value manufacturing (HVM) for New Zealand's economic future. It identifies problems in achieving the potential as integration in the HVM sector, lack of processes to improve international competitive advantage, low level of research and development investment by government and under-investment in the private sector.

In response to the report, the government has announced an investment of \$185 million in HVM over the next five years, through Industrial Research Ltd (a Crown Research Institute).

This is excellent news. The hope is that it is the first of other announcements: there are other sectors that are of equal or greater value in terms of exports, which are suffering the same barriers in development.

Food and Beverage, starting on farm, is a case in point. Rod Oram, business commentator and keynote speaker at the New Zealand Grassland Association Conference in Gisborne last week, told the audience that the government has articulated a goal of trebling income from food and beverage in 15 years. How this is to be achieved is not clear.

In Mr Oram's analysis, it will be possible to increase volume of primary products through increased land use and increased productivity – but only by a little. World price increases will increase the value of food year on year, and the New Zealand brand will be worth more in the future as long as exporters aren't kept under the thumb of international retailers – but only by a little. All require staving off overseas competitors. "Overall, incremental changes aren't going to result in changing the current \$20 billion that New Zealand earns from exporting food and beverage into \$58 billion," said Mr Oram. "We need a big investment in science, both sides of the farm gate."

However, funds have to be invested in the right type of research to make a difference. Anders Crofoot, member of the National Executive of Federated Farmers of New Zealand and outgoing President of NZGA expressed concerns about the direction of pastoral research in recent years as it has moved away from production research. "This year over a third of the papers offered for the conference programme appeared to cover subjects that would not generate a return on farm, but rather focussed on social science and modelling issues. Some of that work is interesting, but how much of it will really make a difference to the economy or the environment?"

The problem for all research providers is the struggle for

the dollar and the attempt to provide best bang for buck. Devolving money to the Crown Research Institutes (CRI) as in the new system doesn't remove the struggle within the CRIs themselves. Their Boards want to make a profit but don't want to cause redundancies – the 'solution' is to find ways of not doing expensive field trials.

Mr Crofoot suggested that on-farm research is important because a new technology to product can be tested within an existing system, However where something that is so different that it can't fit in easily, or where it must be in place long term, is involved, research farms are needed – and they are scarce in New Zealand.

In order to re-establish research farms across the country, investment in the order of that being allocated to High Value Manufacturing (HVM) is required.

Mr Oram suggests that New Zealand will need to enter global partnerships involving investment and trade to ensure funding. This is far more than selling bits of land or, more particularly, selling companies where the profits then vanish to the home country of the investor – it must be strategic and real partnership.

Similarly, Professor Raine and co-authors urged the government to take 'proactive steps to lift the level of local and foreign investment in the New Zealand HVM sector' by courting multinationals and attracting international venture capital.

More money is required throughout R&D in New Zealand in order to achieve the necessary step changes and attract the next generation of investigators. Powering Innovation recommended introducing 'initiatives to produce a new generation of young people inspired to move into the creative and entrepreneurial careers in the Sciences and Engineering'. Agriculture, food and beverage rely on the Sciences and Engineering, and so will benefit from the implementation of this recommendation, as will most other industries – but for agriculture, food and beverage, a review of research 'either side of the farm gate' is vital. Only with independent eyes will New Zealand be able to ensure that the system involving farmers, levy bodies, agri-business, universities, CRIs and independent consultants is actually focussed at appropriate points to maximise value, trust and communication.

Step change is complex and vital.

This is the subject under investigation by NZTE with the aim of 'driving economic growth in the primary sector... watch this space.

Download the full **Powering Innovation** report here <http://www.msi.govt.nz/sites/all/files/u4/HVM%20review%20full%20report.pdf>

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Gisborne 2011

MAKING OUR FUTURE - the primary sector But not as we know it.

Rod Oram was a keynote speaker at this year's conference and his presentation can be found on the NZGA website (<http://grassland.org.nz/newsdetails.php?newsnum=17>).

On the field tour of Papatu Alec McKay presented information on poplars and willows in hill country from work done by Ian McIvor (Plant and Food) and Grant Douglas (AgResearch).

The full article can be downloaded from the website (<http://grassland.org.nz/information.php>).

NZGA AGM

We mark the 80th year with our first female President of the Association, Jacqueline Rowarth with Warwick Lissaman in the Vice President's role. We also welcome 2 farmers to the executive, Laurie Copland, LOC chair for the 2009 Northland conference, and Ashley Cole.



Ashley Cole

Ashley is Managing Director of Murumuru Farms Ltd. This company combines sheep and beef farming, with a machinery/roading division and a bee/honey division. She has responsibility for the 1100 hectare hard hill country property in the Ruapehu district, including daily livestock management with her team of working dogs, finance, feed budgeting and marketing. She is a member of the Beef and Lamb Farmer Council, the Red Meat Sector Strategy Advisory Group, and the AgResearch Invermay Reproduction Project Advisory Panel. Ashley has a total conviction of the sustainability of the sheep and beef sector.



General Business

A rule change for the Association was also voted on regarding the requirement for an annual audit. The Association will now be required to present the Accounts to the AGM as prepared by the accountant. The Executive can request a Review of the Accounts or an Audit be undertaken.

Final Notes

One of our well known members, Dr Doug Edmeades, presented the following paper at the Annual conference of the Grassland Society of NSW earlier this year - 'Pseudo-science: a threat to agriculture?' Doug argues for evidence based science and questions the proliferation of 'feel-good' pseudo science. The paper is on the website (<http://www.grassland.org.nz/userfiles/files/Pseudo-Science%20Paper%20Final.pdf>).

For more on this topic read Dr Ben Goldacre at <http://www.badscience.net/about-dr-ben-goldacre/>

'Tales from the Back Country'

This book is a compilation of working dog and rural stories and photos by one of our members, Dr Katherine Tozer of AgResearch. All profits from the sale of this book will be donated to the Federated Farmers' Adverse Events Fund. For further details go to 'Our Shop' at www.fedfarm.org.nz or contact Katherine (katherine.tozer@agresearch.co.nz).

Conference 2012

Gore Nov 6-8

Come on down and accept the challenge of the Gore LOC and their theme '**Opportunities in land use change**'.

The **Call for Papers** is available on the website, and abstracts are due in by Friday February 24th.

Thanks to Graham Kerr for the photographs



Entering Rongopai Marae



Driving up to the top of Papatu Station



Tom Te Kahu at Papatu