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PASTURE

Farmers' seeds of success

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More farmers are renewing pastures, with regrassing extending over more than 1.5 million hectares of farmland in the past four years.

Pasture seed is a large contributor to $450m of yearly sales in proprietary – owned under licence – seed, with dairying leading the way in pasture renewal and ryegrass and white clover the most planted species.

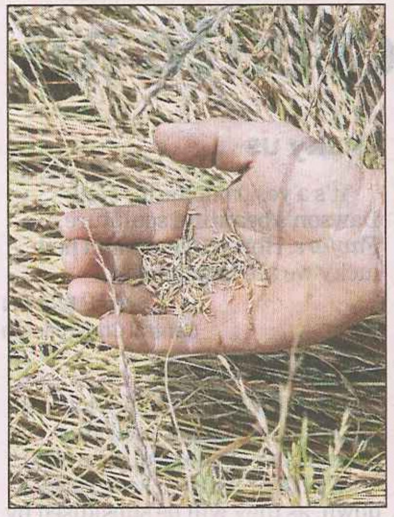
New data from New Zealand Plant Breeding and Research Association (NZPBRA) shows pasture seed sales over the past four years, ending last December, would cover the equivalent of more than 6600 average-sized dairy farms.

Manager Thomas Chin said the plantings were a major contributor to the wider economy with some estimates of pasture production worth $20b.

He said sales could be expected to grow over the 2013 season.

"The key category for us is ryegrass, which took 87 per cent of the market over the four-year period. They have had a good increase of about 18 per cent over the four years, and clover has been pretty good also at an 11 per cent increase."

There was a solid market in pasture options such as fescue and lucerne, he said.


Big seller: Grass seed.
Photo: DON SCOTT/FAIRFAX NZ

The sales data from NZPBRA companies covers proprietary ryegrass, clover, cocksfoot, tall fescue and lucerne seed.

More than 7300 tonnes of perennial, hybrid, Italian and annual ryegrass seed was sold last year, with nearly 650 tonnes of clover seed. Tall fescue totalled 217 tonnes, and lucerne 115 tonnes.

Since 2009, total ryegrass seed sales have exceeded 29,300 tonnes which, at an average sowing rate of 20 kg/ha, is enough to cover just over 1.4m hectares. Lucerne and fescue seed sales over the same period take that total to about 1.53 million hectares.

Chin said dairy paddocks were most commonly renewed, but new pasture sowing extended to sheep, beef and horse farming and other livestock.

"There is drought going on in Northland, and it's dry in Waikato, and they are important dairying areas. It's likely they will have to renew their pastures in the near future. That said, we are finding there has been pretty good uptake the last four years."

He said the data showed farmers were ready to invest in well-bred and researched plant genetics for greater profit.

Pasture Renewal Charitable Trust chairman Murray Willocks said higher sales were the result of a campaign in 2007 to promote the benefits of increasing pasture renewal to farmers.

"The message that pasture is worth over $24.5 billion (over 12 per cent of total GDP) annually to the New Zealand economy has caught the attention of key players in the agribusiness industry. Farm gate returns reached $16.3 billion for the 2010-11 year and there is more potential yet to capitalise on the increased profitability possible from frequent pasture renewal," he said.


Fields of gold: Thomas Chin, manager for the New Zealand Grain & Seed Trade Association.
Photo: DAVID HALLETT/FAIRFAX NZ