

Plant breeders say fungus would improve pastures

Tim Cronshaw

tim.cronshaw@press.co.nz

Farmers will be disadvantaged if a pasture-protecting fungus is denied entry to New Zealand, plant breeders say.

The New Zealand Plant Breeding and Research Association (NZPRA) advances its case for supporting an endophyte to be imported in submissions before the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) in Wellington.

Endophytes are microscopic fungi which live inside the tissue of pasture plants and help protect them from insect pests such as Argentine stem weevil, black beetle and grass grub.

NZPRA manager Thomas Chin said farmers would be at a disadvantage if the entry of *Neotyphodium siegelii* was not allowed, because it was widely available overseas.

He said the endophyte could be of large benefit to farmers by improving pasture performance.

"The endophyte is a new one, but has been used in Australia, South America and the United States.

"We are in support of having this endophyte approved, because it could help protect pastures from unwanted pests and help the seed better tolerate drought conditions. There is a clear benefit and ultimately it will benefit Kiwi farmers, who should see improved productivity and yields in their grass growth."

Chin said the endophyte could help farmers use less insecticides for controlling grass grub, Argentine stem weevil and black beetle.

One of the main chemicals to control the insects, diazinon, is on the EPA's potential removal list.

Chin said the endophyte, if approved, would offer a natural protection if the chemical was shelved.

"The scientific evidence doesn't show any other negative effects on other pests or on ani-



Supporter: NZPRA manager Thomas Chin says the endophyte would be of large benefit to farmers.

Photo: DAVID HALLETT/FAIRFAX NZ

mal health and no detrimental effects on humans either, so in terms of health and safety this particular endophyte ticks the boxes."

The fungus, originally found

in Germany would, if approved, arrive via treated ryegrass seed from Holland or Denmark. Importer DLF Seeds hopes to start multiplying the seed in February and have it commercially available in 2015.

First introduced to New Zealand in the 1990s, novel or safe endophytes have delivered hundreds of millions of dollars

worth of improved pasture productivity and animal performance to the agricultural economy.

New Zealand is a world leader in its development for

pastoral production such as AgResearch's AR1 and AR37 and more lately grass with endophytes are being used to deter birds from airways to prevent bird strike.

The pastoral industry contri-

butes about 35 per cent to New Zealand's annual GDP.

Written submissions from the NZPRA, Beef + Lambs NZ, Federated Farmers, Grasslanz Technology and Dairy NZ supported the application to import and release the endophyte. A concern in the submission by the Department of Conservation, required by legislation, was the potential for insect-resistant ryegrass or seed-cue to crowd out native species.

The EPA is expected to make a decision next month. Fairfax NZ