



Canola, the Esperance experience

Reports by PETER HENDERSON

CANOLA growers in some areas around Esperance are starting to place more emphasis on selecting varieties based on soil types as well as rainfall.

Precision Agronomics consultant Quenten Knight, who covers an area to the north and west of Esperance, said if 10mm-15mm was received by early April, canola seeding could begin.

"The first lesson we learnt last year, and we learn it every year, is that moisture conservation is king," Mr Knight said.

"In our environment summer rain is something we deal with year in year out."

But he said some rainfall areas had poor water holding capacity and some of the medium rainfall areas had subsoil constraints.

He works in 350mm-600mm rainfall zones with soil types of deep sands to heavy alkaline loams.

"Our spring is more influenced by Goldfield weather patterns and it gets pretty hot and nasty very quickly, which is why we are trying to go to quicker maturing varieties to cope with that short harsh spring and again look at our soil type and not necessarily rainfall," he said.

In the Esperance environment we just don't get a cool favourable spring like a lot of the Great Southern does.

He said some people chose the same variety for the entire farm, which tended to produce variable yields from year to year.

"What we would like to do in our area is stop this up and down business and get a bit more of a constant trend and get our canola averages up," Mr Knight said.

He said some canola varieties did well regardless of the season and the plan could be to adapt those varieties to soil types to help lift yield averages.

Mr Knight said many of his clients were also using accurate seeding systems to help produce good canola crops.

"The further west you go towards Munglup there are more of the accurate disc seeding systems which allows canola to be put in at a constant depth with low seeding rates.

"And I think this is going to be more important as the price of seed goes up and we get into hybrids and perhaps GMO type crops.

"We get excellent fertiliser placement so we don't burn the crops off and the other thing that has been a big plus is that we require minimum moisture at seeding to get a crop established, which means we get those crops in earlier."

Mr Knight said he was seeing more grass selective damage, either by growers applying it at the wrong time, during flowering or applying too much.

"Because of herbicide resistance, selective (herbicide) rates are being pushed up to wipe out ryegrass and that is costing 200kg/h-300kg/ha in lost yield.

"It is happening on a much more widespread basis."



Mr Knight said meeting insecticide withholding periods in canola last year was an issue because of the huge budworm infestations.

"The problem with canola is that swathing is the end point in meeting the withholding period, not harvest, so typically the time from spraying to swathing is seven or 10 days," he said.

"So this means we can't use the cheaper insecticides and it's pushing growers to insecticides with lower withholding periods, which adds to or doubles the potential cost of controlling insects."

Mr Knight said precision swathing was being more widely adopted at Esperance.

"The main gains we are getting out of this, apart from nice straight rows, is that we are ending up with no uncut crop or headlands and getting no crop topping overlap," he said.

"We are also able to orientate our swaths so they are not getting hit by prevailing winds."

Mr Knight said many growers using auto steering systems were getting yield gains of 2.5-5pc.

"Some growers estimate they are increasing their returns by \$12/ha in a one tonne crop valued at \$450 so there has been a big uptake of that technology in swathing," he said.

Mr Knight said canola's place in the rotation was changing with more canola being grown after a legume crop after peas, beans or in some cases lupins, and the main thing driving that was two years of consecutive ryegrass control.

"It also gives two years of wheat disease control which helps following cereal crops," he said.

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□ Precision Agronomics consultant Quenten Knight (left) with United Farmers Cooperative agronomy services manager Simon Teakle and Agriculture Department farm economics researcher Jonathon Tocker at the Oilseeds WA workshop.

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