

Evergreen Farming Group

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Introduction

Evergreen Farming is a farmer-driven group that aims to achieve sustainable "Green Farms all Year Round" throughout the agricultural regions of Southern Australia.

The group started during the 1990's in the Bibby Springs area west of Badgingarra (WA), where innovative producers came together to tackle the issues of rising water tables and salinity. The results were impressive and the network grew quickly.

Through many years of applied research, demonstrations and trials on perennial pastures, Evergreen Farming has shown that perennials can substantially increase farm profitability and also combat water-logging, salinity and erosion.

Members now span the state's agricultural area from Northampton to Esperance.

The group has an excellent working relationship with agribusiness and the research community.

Evergreen Farming systems feature:

- Perennial and annual species
- Sub-tropical and temperate species
- Grasses, legumes and herbs
- Fodder shrubs

Evergreen Farming systems deliver:

- Extended growing seasons
- Increased productivity
- Higher water use
- Drought tolerance
- More ground cover

Benefits of an Evergreen Farming system:

- Increased profits
- Lower cost of production
- Reduced need for supplementary feeding
- Less salinity, waterlogging and erosion
- Healthier soils

Benefits of Membership:

- Quarterly technical newsletters
- Access to members area of the website
- Discounted entry to field days, tours, and seminars
- Agronomic information
- Latest research results
- Opportunity to host research and demonstrations

¹ The text of this talk is taken from the Evergreen Farming website <http://www.evergreen.asn.au>

History of the Evergreen Farming Group:

The Evergreen Farming group has emerged out of the West Midlands region of Western Australia (WA). This is the coastal region which runs for approximately 400 km north of Perth. It is part of the agricultural area of WA where there is broadacre farming on cleared land. Broadacre agriculture in WA is based on rainfed cropping and grazing of improved pastures.

The West Midlands sand plain was developed using wheatbelt farming systems based on a limited number of annual crop and pasture species. These species failed on the poorer sands which are a large part of the West Midlands. As a result many farm businesses failed and soil erosion became common. Water tables were also rising rapidly. Despite the hydrogeology being very different to the wheatbelt, locals began to see waterlogging and salinity as serious threats for the future.

In 1990 two sets of trials were started to test alternative perennial pastures in the West Midlands. Private Agronomist, Jesse Skoss (Honorary Life Member), tested a range of sub tropical perennial grasses and legumes on AMS member's farms. The Department of Agriculture began a research project testing a range of annual and perennial pastures for sandy soils. In these small plot trials the winter growing perennials (eg. Phalaris, Cocksfoot, Fescue) failed to survive summer even when there was considerable summer rain. To the surprise of the locals and many Western Australian "experts", it was the summer growing or 'C4' perennial grasses that survived. Experience now shows these grasses survive on a wide range of soil types and through very dry summers.

The early research projects were not continued due to a lack of funding support. The concept of summer growing pastures was too radical for the Western Australian farming paradigm of the time. However a small group of farmers and a local adviser were excited enough to continue on-farm testing and development of these perennials. Some of these pioneering farmers now have hundreds of hectares of these pastures.

These early pioneers talked regularly and toured each other's farms to share their experiences. As well as informal paddock inspections they also organised field days with the local Department of Agriculture staff. Gradually through the 1990's the interest and numbers of farmers using perennials increased.

While there was an active group of people working together on these new farming systems through out the 1990's, it was not until 1998 that the group became semi formalised. They named themselves the "Evergreen Group". Their first task was to conduct a survey of farmers to identify the key issues and set priorities. The Evergreen Group has held regular field days and a highly successful Queensland Study Tour to the eastern states in 2000.

"Evergreen Farming" was officially incorporated in August 2001.

The Evergreen Farming group has also expanded its interest beyond summer active perennial grasses. Members are also developing systems including lucerne, sub tropical perennial legumes, summer fodder & grain crops, alley farming with fodder shrubs, salt bush, perennial clovers and companion annual legumes and grasses.

Evergreen Executive 2007

Chairman: Erin Gorter of Kojonup.

Vice Chairman: Bob Wilson of Lancelin.

Secretary/Treasurer: David Monks of Badgingarra

Committee members: include Bob Leeson of Lancelin, Craig Forsyth of Dongara, Paul Omodei of Manjimup and Charlie Hick of Narrikup.