

New survey shows plenty of work ahead for CANFA

- Neville Gould, May 2009

A recent new survey report commissioned by the SANTFA and CAAANZ, titled “Adoption of no-till and conservation farming practices in Australian grain growing regions: current status and trends” written by Rick S Llewellyn, CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems and Frank D’Emden, Dept. Agriculture & Food Western Australia has been released. The complete paper can be downloaded from the Articles page of the CANFA website.

This study expands on a study of no-till adoption conducted in 2003 (D’Emden et al 2006). This 2008 study was expanded by GRDC, DAFF and SANTFA to include selected cropping regions across WA, SA, Victoria, NSW and Southern Queensland. Using the extensive agricultural database of Solutions Research (a national surveying company), primary cropping decision makers on grain growing farms from across selected grain growing regions were contacted (NSW regions and other selected regions are shown in Table 1). The small number of respondents from the NSW Mallee means that the results from this region need to be treated with some caution and in some cases averages from this region are not presented.

The interviews began in April with call backs completed by early July 2008 resulting in a total of 1172 respondents nationally. Of all potential respondents contacted nationally, 14% refused to complete the survey. A relatively broad definition of no-till seeding was used in the study based around seeding with low soil disturbance (points or discs) and no prior cultivation.

From CANFA’s perspective, the results in the report are very disappointing (Table 2). Whilst the proportion of NSW growers who have used no till has increased slightly over the past 5-10 years and levels of adoption are high in Southern and Northern NSW amongst respondents, the levels in Central West and NSW Mallee are very low (2 of the 3 lowest rates in all areas sampled in Australia). The NSW average is second only to WA, but could be considerably higher.

The other major disappointment is the high level of respondents who had used no-till but chose not to continue or have decreased the proportion of crop sown using no-till systems. Again this is particularly high in the Central West but also in Northern NSW, with only Southern Qld and pockets of Victoria showing similar or higher tendencies to move away from no-till. Of those currently using no-till, nearly all intend to continue with the system in all areas of NSW. However, a large number of those respondents not using no-till (17% in Central West and 18% in NSW Mallee) are adamant that they will not be using no-till in 2013. It would appear that CANFA still has a considerable amount of hard work ahead in the Central West and the Mallee.

Those growers using no-till are however obviously growing in confidence with their systems with all areas (except Mallee with no responses) showing a strong trend to sow more of their crop using no-till into the future. Notwithstanding NSW continues to show a strong dependency on tillage with the average proportion of crop sown using no-till in 2008 being substantially lower than all other states. This is perhaps linked to many landholders considering that a tillage operation is required when coming out of pasture (eg long-term lucerne) before entering into the cropping phase (which tends to be performed entirely using no-till systems). The data also shows a strong result for NSW with the increasing level of adoption of disc openers (and coulters), which was the highest in Australia. This is not entirely unexpected given the origin of many disc machines in NSW or northern Qld and the nature of NSW soils which tend to be less abrasive than those in WA and SA.