

## **A successful model for applied research**

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### **Abstract**

The Foundation for Arable Research (FAR) was established in 1995 and is continuing to retain the enthusiasm and support of arable farmers in New Zealand. Established under NZ's Commodity Levies Act, requiring a compulsory levy on the sale of all grain and seed, it needs a 5 or 6-yearly renewal referendum so its staff are always aware that the farmers need to see value for their investment. FAR's research investments include mainly applied, farm-based research - agronomic management, cultivar evaluation, crop establishment and rotations. Farmer committees direct the research funds and staff are responsible for managing this investment (mostly contracted out) and then ensuring the farmers get the information they need to add value to their business. Information transfer covers a range of methods including written fact sheets, seminars and conferences, field days and training courses, emails and website.

### **Media summary**

The Foundation for Arable Research is NZ's levy organisation, undertaking the applied research that will enable arable farmers to improve their production systems.

### **Key words**

crop research, research funding, research outcomes

### **Introduction**

New Zealand's Commodity Levies Act is a framework to enable organisations, particularly in the primary sector, to undertake a referendum of an industry group in order to establish a compulsory levy for the purposes identified in that referendum. During 1994 such a referendum was undertaken by arable farmers to enable an organisation called the Foundation for Arable Research Incorporated to come into existence.

Since the appointment of the first staff member in 1995, FAR has moved from strength to strength, gaining increased farmer support at its first renewal referendum in 1999. It is now recognised as the key independent provider of research and information for the benefit of NZ's arable farmers.

FAR's levy collection covers the whole of NZ and all arable crops harvested with a combine harvester, i.e. cereals, pulses, maize, herbage and small seeds. Another organisation collects a levy from vegetable (non-seed) crops while no levy is currently collected for any crop harvested before maturity (i.e. for silage).

Another key income source for FAR which has developed in the last 3 years, is from external grants. The main source of this funding is the MAF Sustainable Farming Fund, which supports projects driven by the farmers to improve financial and environmental performance. In the past year, FAR's major income has been approximately ? from levies and ? from grants.

### **Structure**

The structure of FAR is its strength, keeping it simple but enabling the farmers to have a clear route for inputting ideas and opinions. FAR splits NZ into 6 (uneven area) regions, 2 in the North Island, 4 in the

South Island. Each of these regions has an Arable Research Group (ARG) of farmers and sometimes an industry member. The ARG members are nominated by other farmers and are the key contact point between FAR staff and farmers. The chairman of the ARG sits on the FAR board and other members represent their region on the research committees.

We currently have 8 staff, 3 of whom are administrative, 1 mainly information transfer, 2 split between research and information transfer and 2 predominantly research management. FAR has one office, in Lincoln, Canterbury, from which it services the whole of NZ.

Of FAR's spending, about 70% is on research, 15% on information transfer and 15% on operation.

## **Research**

FAR staff do not generally undertake the research themselves, although recently the amount of "hands-on" work has increased as we have been involved in establishing some trials with interested farmers before passing the work over to researchers. It was decided when FAR was established that there was already enough research capability in NZ and that FAR should be a research manager and information transfer organisation, so as not to compete with the existing capabilities. However this capability has remained constant or declined while FAR's research portfolio has increased.

The research committees direct the areas of research that FAR undertakes. These committees cover the crop groups of cereals, maize, herbage seeds and pulses. They meet formally once or twice a year, discussing issues from the past season and prioritising research interests for the year ahead. The staff responsible for those crop groups then discuss the ideas with researchers and arrange protocols and contracts.

In its early years FAR went through a formal process of calling for proposals from researchers but the increasing "paper-war" and the small size of the industry (meaning that we quickly got to know the interests and capabilities of the researchers) led us to re-evaluate this method and move instead to our staff approaching the most appropriate researcher with an idea or protocol and negotiating the work to be done. We still encourage researchers to come to us with ideas, but have simply reduced the form filling required.

## **Information Transfer**

Some staff have a key role in this area, responsible for discussion groups, while most are involved in writing research summaries (Arable Updates) and presenting results at our seminars, field days and conferences. Information transfer is a significant investment as it is our view that there's no point doing the research if the farmers cannot access or understand the results. A range of methods is also used, most offered at no extra cost to farmers. However, for some discussion groups, conferences and specialised training courses, nominal costs are charged where the opportunities are seen to be additional to our core roles.

We see our task as providing information, not interpreting our research for each property and making recommendations for growers. The discussion groups, set up only 3 years ago, come a bit closer to this yet they still stop short at recommending a particular option - this is not FAR's role as an independent organisation.

We also encourage industry members (consultants, company agronomists etc) to be involved in our information transfer as we recognise that many farmers will prefer to be guided by these people rather than act directly on the information we provide to them.

## **Collaboration**

A significant amount of the research funded by FAR "piggybacks" on government-funded research, mainly in the Crown Research Institutes. While the NZ government will not directly fund applied research (except through the likes of the Sustainable Farming Fund) we are viewed by the researchers as the way to give the government-funded research an applied twist.

Collaboration with other countries is important to us. An early role model for the establishment of FAR was from the UK. Since then we have made contact with researchers and research bodies throughout the world. A relationship with similar organisations in Australia has developed in the past 3-4 years to the stage that FAR staff are now working collaboratively with groups in Australia, co-funded by the GRDC, using the information and experience we have gained from NZ and overseas to help Australian growers push their crop yield boundaries.

### **The future**

How can we continue to improve? There is still plenty of work to be done in this forever evolving industry while we deal with the vagaries of the weather, politics and the exchange rate. The arable industry in New Zealand seems to be constantly under threat and we must help farmers to meet the needs of the future and "add value to the business of arable farming".