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**MUSCLING UP LEGUMES**

Two years after its commercial launch, the University of WA (UWA) based Centre for Legumes in Mediterranean Agriculture (CLIMA) hosts 23 postgraduate scientists conducting 50 research projects into legume performance.

As commercialisation nears for several resultant pulse products, including the 2004/05 release of ascochyta blight resistant chickpea and a detoxified, drought tolerant grass pea, CLIMA has launched its 2001/02 Biennial Report to update growers and industry stakeholders on the progress of legume research.

CLIMA launched as a research alliance between the WA Department of Agriculture, UWA, CSIRO and Murdoch University after its Co-operative Research Centre (CRC) phase concluded in 2000. It now has more external funding than when it was a CRC.

Besides large export markets, domestic pulse consumption was expanding behind increasing health consciousness, in response to the dietary woes that cost Australia $2 billion per year in medical and associated expenses.

According to CLIMA Director, Kadambot Siddique, further human consumption markets could emerge as CLIMA scientists participate in research to harvest legumes for isoflavones capable of prohibiting cancer cell growth.

Expanding markets complement the value of legumes to cropping systems, where they fix atmospheric nitrogen and lift subsequent wheat yields by up to 500 kg/ha.

New CLIMA research reveals that legumes can also benefit the environment and cereal performance by increasing soil phosphorus availability to help moderate the $200 million WA farmers spend each year on phosphorus fertilisers

“CLIMA pastures provide significant agronomic benefits too. Cadiz French serradella, for example, can be brown manured to provide weed control worth up to $30/ha in subsequent wheat crop productivity,” Professor Siddique said.

Besides commercial products, CLIMA’s biotechnology research has identified molecular markers which will underpin breeding efforts for years to come, such as for identifying anthracnose resistance genes in lupins.
“Legumes have only been subject to breeding improvement for half the time cereals have, so we still have a long way to go,” Professor Siddique noted.

“CLIMA is adding muscle to WA’s grain and pasture legume species to better combat diseases and conditions which challenge their performance. Ongoing industry support is central to this outcome.”

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