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SEED CAPITAL NEEDED

Trading of unlicensed seed threatens the viability of WA’s multi-million dollar pulse and legume pasture industries.

Such illicit trading could mean diseases such as Anthracnose, which has completely wiped out the albus lupin industry, Chocolate Spot, which has slashed WA faba bean production by 75 per cent, and Ascochyta blight, which has halved chickpea production, will not receive the research focus needed to quickly breed resistant varieties.

Plant breeders’ rights, intellectual property and a user-pays economy have forced breeding companies to rely heavily on royalty incomes to fund their research and development programs, but the trading of unlicensed seed is cutting into these revenues.

Director of WA’s Centre for Legumes in Mediterranean Agriculture (CLIMA), Kadambot Siddique, said that business-focused research centres, such as CLIMA, needed seed royalties to finance the development of new crop varieties.

“During its CRC phase, CLIMA released 18 new grain and pasture or fodder legume varieties to create more productive and environmentally sustainable farming systems for WA growers and we need seed royalties to help sustain these efforts,” he noted.

The new CLIMA research alliance competes with Australia’s best breeding programs for research and development funding, including from the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC).

Although it has $3 million of GRDC funding this year, CLIMA needs more diverse income streams to fund its world class facilities and staff.

“When a grower sows a CLIMA-developed pulse, such as Cassab, or a pasture such as Cadiz, they profit from many years of costly training, international collaboration, hi-tech laboratories and exhaustive field trials,” Professor Siddique said.

“And those costs need to be recouped through royalties paid as part of the shelf price of seed.”

Growers selling seed harvested from these varieties, for others to plant, slash the revenue available to fund further research and development by organisations such as CLIMA.
The Department of Agriculture manages the commercialisation of CLIMA varieties and advises that CLIMA and Department varieties can only be legally bought from licensed seed companies, or their agents, such as sub-licensee seed growers or official retailers.

CLIMA grains and pasture commercialisation officer, Dr Howard Carr, Department of Agriculture, explained that fines of up to $55,000 for individuals and $275,000 for corporations applied to breeches of plant breeders’ rights by trading unlicensed seed.

But Professor Siddique said he felt the biggest disincentive to trade unlicensed seed was the slowing or loss of new varieties to the industry.

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