

New trials to determine the best time to cut canola for hay have shown that the oilseed can add flexibility and reduce risk in unpredictable seasons.

Consultant Kate McCormick, who is overseeing the trials as part of the GRDC and Australian Oilseeds Federation *Better Canola* program, says the results show canola can provide an important disease and weed break as a rotation crop and another income stream as either hay or grain.

The 2007 season trials cut canola grown at Longerenong College, near Horsham in north-west Victoria, at four different stages.

- Full flowering (September 6);
- Late flowering (September 27);
- Mid-podfill (October 17); and,
- Grain harvest (November 20).

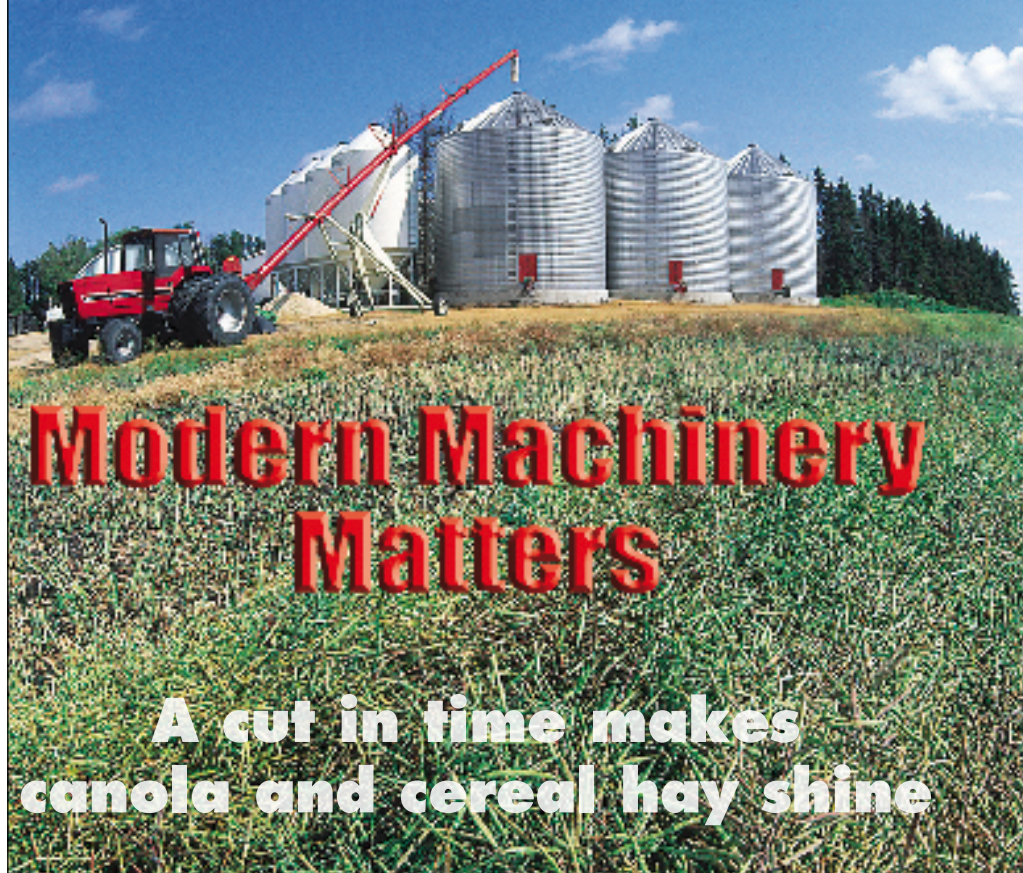
Sampling by the Birchip Cropping Group and Feedtest (a commercial feed-analysis business of the Victorian Department of Primary Industries) found the optimum cutting time to achieve the best compromise between quantity and quality was at late-flowering stage.

In this case that was in late September, where a \$270 per tonne price for hay and a 3.9 tonnes per hectare yield was able to return as much as \$660 per hectare after accounting for all production and haymaking costs.

"Even at \$200 per tonne for hay, a net return of \$400 per hectare is a more desirable outcome than harvesting the grain," Kate says.

Canola harvested for grain at the same site would have lost \$26 per hectare overall with a yield of just 0.4 tonnes per hectare – and at an oil quality seven per cent lower than the quality the grain price is quoted on.

"The trials are saying that canola hay is another option if the grain outlook isn't



looking particularly good," Kate says. "And the trial analysis has shown that if you cut later you're going to have poorer quality – if you cut earlier, you might have fantastic quality hay, but you won't get the bulk."

While the trial cut earliest – at full flowering – returned the highest quality, its yields, at 3.1 tonnes per hectare were lower than the second hay cut, netting a final return of \$475 per hectare based on a price of \$270 per hectare. The early cut would need to command a premium to make as much money as late-flowering-cut hay – something unlikely in drought years, despite the high hay price, Kate says.

Canola cut at mid-podfill in October yielded the same as in late flowering, although quality was lower.

"One of the key findings is that the later you go with cutting, the more you reduce protein, dry matter digestibility and metabolisable energy, and the more you increase fibre," Kate says.

"So, in a nutshell, quality goes down the later you cut it."

Just a fluke or the real deal?

The project was initiated after a season where the combination of late frosts and drought meant growers who had been forced to cut their canola grain crop for hay found a keen market from a hay-hungry dairy industry. For some growers it became their most profitable paddock.

"So the questions were asked: 'Is this just a one-off fluke? Could we do it again?'," Kate says. "Could you grow canola specifi-

cally for hay in most years or are you better off to grow it for grain? We wanted to get some science to back up the experience."

Kate says the trials have revealed not only the best cutting time, but have established that canola can be used with confidence as a rotation crop, with markets for hay or grain, according to how the season unfolds.

She suggests cutting canola for hay reduces the overall risk of growing canola because it provides an alternative use.

"People who have dropped canola from the rotation because they haven't been able to grow it profitably for grain could bring it back as a weed or disease-break and cut it for hay."

Source: GRDC Ground Cover – Melissa Marino.
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THE MAIN POINTS

- Hay quality decreases the later you cut.
- Cutting at the late-flowering stage is a good compromise between quality and quantity.
- Sow early to maximise potential.
- Manage inputs to avoid high up-front costs.
- Chemical record and withholding periods of chemical applied should be checked before cutting for hay.
- Hay removes more nutrients from the paddock than grain, so nutrient budgeting and soil testing to assist with fertiliser planning are advised.

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