

# Fall Armyworm case study

## FAW challenges early sown oats on the Darling Downs

Roxley Ehrlich – Darling Downs, QLD

### Farm overview

Roxley and his family milk cows near Evergreen on Queensland's Darling Downs. Their self-sufficient dryland farm runs a herd of around 100 cows, supported by a diverse forage base of Green, Gatton and Bambatsi Panic and Rhodes grass pastures, summer Sudan grass, Dolichos Lablab and 'Sugardrip' forage sorghum, as well as winter grazing cereals (predominantly oats).

### A promising start turns into a pest challenge

In 2023, as part of their normal forage program, Roxley sowed 40 hectares of oats in early February. With favourable, wet and drizzly conditions, he was looking to capitalise on the available moisture and establish a high-quality source of early winter forage.

The crop germinated quickly and established well. However, Roxley was already concerned about increasing insect activity across the farm. There had been significant and unusual moth activity in the summer grass pastures, along with what he suspected was Fall Armyworm (FAW) activity in some more mature Sudan grass grazing crops.

During a routine crop inspection, Roxley noticed extensive leaf damage in a paddock of Sugardrip forage sorghum, which was approaching 30 cm in height.

**"It was like the crop had been hit by a hailstorm," Roxley explained.**

On closer inspection, numerous FAW caterpillars were found throughout the crop. Concerned that the pest may also have moved into his newly established oats, Roxley inspected the crop in paddocks approximately 800 metres away. The oats, which were at the early tillering stage, were also being heavily damaged by caterpillars.

Following discussions with a neighbouring farmer who had recently had the pest identified in early-sown crops by a Queensland Department of Primary Industries (DPI) agronomist, along with his own research, Roxley believed the caterpillars were FAW larvae.



Roxley Ehrlich  
Photo courtesy of Roxley Ehrlich, Dairy farmer Darling Downs Qld

At the time, there were no registered chemical treatment options available for the infestation. With few practical management options, Roxley was forced to watch as the oat crop was consumed by FAW in less than a week.

### A costly second attempt

Believing the outbreak had passed, Roxley completely resowed the oat crop in early March. Germination was again successful, but the young crop suffered another major FAW attack, with around 70% of the crop destroyed.

A third planting, undertaken in late March, finally established successfully and provided the winter forage the herd needed. By then, however, the cost of establishing the crop had effectively tripled through repeated seed and sowing expenses. More importantly, the failure of the first two plantings delayed the herd's transition onto higher-quality winter forage by around six weeks. The loss of six-week growth of winter crop may add to using up stored forage or buying in feed to fill this feeding gap.

Although the herd did not run out of feed, cows were required to remain on summer pastures rather than transitioning onto the higher-quality autumn oats. Roxley estimated this resulted in a production loss of approximately three-to-four litres of milk per cow per day for at least six weeks.

The experience demonstrated that the impact of FAW extended well beyond the direct cost of crop establishment. The pest affected the timing and quality of the farm's forage supply, with a flow-on effect on milk production.

## Taking the risk on early sowing

The 2023 experience also prompted Roxley to reconsider whether the benefits of early-sown oats justified the increased pest risk.

Ultimately, Roxley decided that it did.

"In our dryland system, we must take rainfall events and run with them," Roxley said. "Early winter forage can set us up for the whole year, so we are willing to roll the dice on these crops despite the risk. The earlier we get onto winter feed, the quicker the cows lift in production."

That strategy has continued to pay dividends. Early sown oats successfully established in both 2024 and 2025, growing on fallowed moisture during seasons that were less favourable for the farm's subtropical grass pastures.

Roxley believes these subtropical grasslands may play a role in the persistence of FAW during softer seasons where conditions are ideal for growing summer pasture. They potentially provide a source of larvae and moths that can move into newly established, more attractive crops when conditions change.

## An ongoing management challenge

The lessons from 2023 remain relevant. In 2026, FAW again appeared in early sown pastures, raising similar questions about how best to manage the pest while maintaining the benefits of early forage establishment.

For Roxley, the experience has highlighted the importance of balancing pest risk against the significant production benefits that can come from getting winter forage established early. Roxley suggests that walking the paddocks to look for FAW is essential but being prepared with a diversified and established carry over summer forage base is useful for risk management.

While FAW has added another layer of uncertainty to the decision to sow early, the potential value of an early, high-quality forage crop means it remains an important part of the farm's strategy.



FAW larvae

Photo courtesy of Roxley Erlich, Dairy farmer Darling Downs Qld

## Ehrlich farm - Key insights

- Around 70% of the crop destroyed.
- Balance pest risk against the significant production benefits that can come from getting winter forage established early.
- Walking the paddocks to look for FAW is essential.
- Be prepared with a diversified and established carry over summer forage base to manage risk.

### Key messages

**Assess FAW risk** and decide on a plan even if you have not experienced FAW on your farm.  
See **Assessing Fall Armyworm risk on dairy farms**.

**Monitor and inspect** paddocks at least every five to seven days – frequency depends on assessed risk.  
See **Fall Armyworm Record sheet** and the **Fall Armyworm Calculator**.

**Accurate identification is critical** – make sure it's FAW and not another caterpillar species.  
See **Fall Armyworm Identification guide**.

**Seek support quickly** – If you suspect FAW, check in with your adviser or agronomist immediately.  
Do not wait.  
See **Fall Armyworm Field Guide**.

**Dairy Australia FAW resources** – Comprehensive FAW resources are available through your local Dairy Australia team or on **dairyaustralia.com.au**.

Photo left – Glossy shield bug preying on FAW larvae–Lower Hunter Valley, NSW  
Photo courtesy Dr Neal Moss, Scibus

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