

ON THE FARM – THE GOOD DIRT

MARCH EDITION

FARMERS TEST ALTERNATIVE FERTILISERS

Now that traditional forms of fertilisers are so expensive what are the alternatives? Recent fluctuations in the price of conventional fertiliser have led farmers to look for alternatives, but with that comes questions of how do we know that they will work in our soils and climate? Finding answers is difficult at times as there are few independent trials. Trialing new products and practices locally is important for farmers to get a handle on how effective and practical they will be in local conditions.

Dennis Taylor, a Strathbogie Ranges beef producer questioned what fertiliser to use on his mainly acidic, sandy loam and granitic-structured soils. “Looking, trialing and learning is important in farming,” observed Dennis. He decided that a trial using different alternative fertilisers would help him find some answers.

Three other farmers from the Strathbogie Tableland Landcare Group joined Dennis to set up trial plots of various alternative fertilisers, now known as the Strathbogie Alternative Fertiliser Trial. The group’s other members are David Jamieson, David Hamilton and Brian Law. With the support of Landcare Project Officer Kerri Robson, the Gecko CLaN and Granite Creeks Project Inc. they secured funding for the project.

From the beginning, the group wanted a thorough and closely monitored trial. The trial will run for at least three years to gather data on soil carbon, grass production, feed quality, plant composition, soil moisture and microbial activity. Super phosphate is included in the trial to compare it with the alternative fertilisers. Cost effectiveness of the fertilisers is the ‘bang for your buck’ part, which David Jamieson highlights.



L-R Dennis Taylor, David Hamilton, Kerri Robson (Landcare Project Officer), Brian Law and David Jamieson.

Good trial design is essential to assess the effectiveness of different alternatives. The group wanted the trial to be big enough to allow people to see differences clearly and observe changes. Each test plot is 6m by 100m, with a 4m buffer in between. There are eight alternative fertilisers being tested, as well as super phosphate and a control with no treatment. These are replicated four times, making 40 test plots in all.

Base-line data is vital so soil tests were completed in May and June 2010. The entire 24ha paddock was tested before the fertilisers were applied. Subsequent soil tests have been taken from each test plot to determine and quantify changes in soil fertility and microbiology.

The trial is also monitoring cattle grazing behavior, with cattle able to graze wherever they choose.

Soil and pasture measurement tools must be easy for farmers to use. “Everything is designed so that it can be replicated by other farmers,” explains David Hamilton, “if we make it too complicated people won’t do it.” The height of grass prior to grazing is measured in each plot using an MLA ruler. A recent workshop was designed to help local farmers read and interpret their soil tests and make soil management decisions accordingly.

Setting up the trial has inspired the group and they are keen to share information and experience with other farmers. They will hold workshops on calibrating spray equipment for liquid fertilisers, plant ID and soil microbiology. Soil pits at the site will help farmers understand the soil that they are working with, its structure and barriers to plant growth. Farmers can then use this information to decide for themselves the effectiveness of different fertilisers.

WHAT’S ON

Farm tour – soils and steep hills

Tour of Kulaba, Seymour, and Habbies Howe, Highlands

March 31st, 10am-4.30pm.

Registration Rhiannon Apted 5736 0108

Carbon in Farming workshop

April 18th, 7.30pm, RSL Hall, 27

Murchison St Broadford

RSVP Sonia Sharkey 5734 6312

The work by the Strathbogie Tableland Landcare Group is a demonstration of the efforts of land managers and the community to improve soil health with support from the Goulburn Broken CMA and partners with funding through the Australian Government’s Caring for Our Country Program. For details on the Goulburn Broken CMA Soil Health Action Plan please visit www.gbcma.vic.gov.au.

FURTHER INFO

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