

ON THE FARM – THE GOOD DIRT

FARM MONITORING MAKES BETTER CENTS

John Kelly has raised beef cattle and prime lambs at his property in Euroa for over 15 years. His aim has been to improve output and productivity through attention to fundamentals – particularly those surrounding soil health.

Regular measurement using a variety of monitoring tools is an essential practice for John. The recording of information and reference to his on-farm data gives him confidence to adjust and move into new production. Soil, pasture, parasites and weight gain are in his program of measurement and evaluation.



John Kelly with assistant Hayden Berry in the weaner yard.

“We need to be aware of changing environments and conditions that can cause problems, and testing and monitoring helps pick up these issues early,” John observes. “With the wet summers like we’ve had over the past two years conditions changed from the previous drought years.”

In 2011 his farm nitrate levels dropped from 25 to 10 mg/kg. Sulphur levels dropped from 32 – 12 mg/kg. “The plants didn’t shut down in their growth cycle. By the end of summer there was decay in the paddocks and a lot of nitrogen had been used up and the pasture lacked sufficient protein.” Given a clear picture from his soil testing, John knows that for 2012 he’ll need sulphur and he’ll put on single super phosphate and later urea.

Early on John paid \$3,000 for a set of portable scales. “I had no idea when I bought them that I’d use them as much as I do.” Supplying cattle to a supermarket chain means accurate weights are vital. Sending cattle off at target weight means he doesn’t attract penalties and he is able to maintain a valuable contract and a steady income stream. Much as he loves farming John is clear-sighted about his purpose, “You are not there to mind cattle, you’re there to put weight on them.”

Much of the guesswork of farming is taken out when farmers can see and measure the effects of soil health practices, pasture selection and grazing regimes. Farmers can’t each do their

own extensive trials, but a collective such as the Euroa Grazing Group can set up plots throughout a district and pool the information.

The measurement of weight gain in cattle in a group trial plot on John’s farm in 2011 enabled John to affirm his use of urea on pasture. On 26 May his cattle averaged 317kg. In July they were down to 286kg and “looked terrible, as if they would fall over.” It didn’t matter what John did, his stock failed to put on weight. “If I hadn’t been weighing them I wouldn’t have had a clue.” There was plenty of green feed and roughage. John decided to put urea on the plot and after that the cattle put on an average of 1.42kg a day for the first week and 1.85kg from then on, “even though it was cold.” By end of December they were at an average of 484kg.

Monitoring worm burden through faecal tests gives John an accurate picture of parasite numbers in his stock. Sometimes the tests return low counts, in which case he doesn’t drench. Three flock sample tests costing \$82 is considerably cheaper than paying for chemicals and labour, which could be as much as \$3,000 for a large mob of sheep. “And why build up parasite immunity if you don’t need to run that risk,” points out John.

John is adamant, “You’ve got to do the weighing and the sums, you’ve got to measure and monitor!”

The Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority has received funding through the Australian Government’s *Caring for Our Country* for the ‘Beyond SoilCare’ project. Our objective is to work with the farming community to promote soil health, particularly in the granite and sedimentary hills of the Strathbogies and the Goulburn and Broken riverine plains. We will be providing regular stories from farms and farmers around the catchment. The project provides a great opportunity for groups of farmers to come together in support networks to promote ideas for better management of soil health and put farmer-led demonstrations into practice.

WHAT’S ON

Beyond SoilCare Soil Test Interpretation Days - Ruffy and Strathbogie

3rd and 6th Feb 2012, 7.30am-12.30pm

Info and RSVP Rhiannon Apted 5736 0108 or rhiannona@gbcma.vic.gov.au

New Dryland New Ideas workshop series GMLN Shepparton

8th, 15th, 22nd and 29th Feb, 6.15pm onwards

Info and RSVP 5821 3530 gmln@inet.net.au

National Soils Forum

8 & 9 March, Bendigo

Info NCCMA 5448 7124 info@nccma.vic.gov.au

FURTHER INFO

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