

‘Soil Stamina’ the key to success

Over 40 farmers recently attended the ‘Soil Stamina’ day to gain a better understanding of soil health and visit two farms in the Coleraine district.

‘Soil Stamina’ is a Peter Francis Points Arboretum and Network SW partnership project with funding from Caring for Our Country, Glenelg Hopkins CMA and Central Highlands Agribusiness Forum.

Healthy soil is the backbone of sustainable, productive and profitable farming. Developing effective, efficient, long-term techniques to improve soil health is essential for sustainable agriculture. Improvement in soil structure, soil pH, organic content and nutrient performance is possible through changed management practices and leads to better production and financial returns. Part of the project is to set up three demonstration farms to trial alternative fertilisers and increasing organic matter and soil biology.

The first farm visit was to visit one of the demonstration farmers, Warwick & Lynn Brown, who have a 600ha beef and sheep property at Konongwootong. The farm was settled by Warwick ancestors in 1862. Warwick first started farming there in 1993 working for his grandparents. When his Grandfather passed away in 1996, he took over the farm.

Warwick said his first seven years were dedicated to fencing, planting trees and rabbit control. Warwick soil tested but the results did not have any real meaning to him. So he would ring the fertiliser company and order single super at the recommended rate on the soil test when funding was available.

The last four years has seen a questioning of this method and a change in thinking. Warwick realised he needed to understand his soil better, including his soil test results.

Warwick said, ‘Soil testing is important, but it is more important to get someone to put it into plain English for you’.

Warwick has applied lime with carbon and boron in the past two years to improve the acidity of his soil. He is also trialling using liquid phos with kelp and believes he is seeing a difference in soil health in his pasture paddocks.

Warwick has realised there is no one set recipe to improve soil health and that every farm and every paddock has different soil health requirements.

“It is important to learn as much as you can from different people and different places”, Warwick said. “Try to absorb as much as possible”, he added.

“Soil is a complex system of physical, chemical and biological components”, said Warwick. “I am sure we don’t know the entire soil story yet. I think I will still be learning about soils until the day I die!” he added.

The group then visited John and Jenny Kane’s farm just south of Coleraine. John and Jenny have 200 Angus beef cattle on their 240 ha property.

John is passionate about soils, especially how the soils, plants, animals and humans all interact together. "Soil health is the cornerstone to successful farming," John said.

He undertakes regular soil tests and has developed a fertiliser regime particular to his farm.

Correcting the Ca/Mg ratio has been the key starting point. John believes there needs to be the correct mineral balance for both the chemistry and biology to be effective. He has found that healthier soil has definitely produced healthier stock and pastures.

When asked what decision tools were used, John said, "Proper soil tests, proper soil tests and then more proper soil tests".

Other tools he uses are a refractometer, portable pH meter, penetrometer (home made), smelling the soil, tasting the clover yourself and studying herd health.

John claims you can really taste the difference in good quality clover.

"Quality clover actually tastes sweet, where as poor quality is quite bitter", he said. "Don't be fooled by the amount of lush growth. It is quality, not quantity that matters", he added.

John has a five year program and uses alternative fertilisers such as fish, kelp, lime, reactive rock phosphate, soft rock phosphate, trace elements, fulvic acid and phosphoric acid to improve the biology, soil structure and soil health. This has resulted in increased pasture growth and an improved pH of his soil from 4.5 to 6.3.

He also aerates his pasture with a mechanical aerator in Spring, which cracks the hard pan 4-6 inches from the top and creates more top soil.

John's soil test show his soil organic matter is now 8% and his humus is 4%. His soil retains more soil moisture over the summer period and his stocking rate is 17 DSE. John says improving the soil health has resulted in improved quality pasture growth and his stock are healthy and content.

John challenges land managers to take total responsibility for making soil fertility decisions. He would like to see more farmers take the responsibility to access the latest knowledge and information on soils and weigh up for themselves the different options and alternatives.

"It's not just luck", said John. "What I am doing with the soil on my farm is working".

Soil Stamina is running another bus tour on Wednesday 17 June. Hear from Dr Maarten Stapper (as seen on Australian Story). Maarten will speak on improving profitability of farming by harnessing the power of natural soil processes. We will also visit Waltanna Farms who use a variety of methods to improve soil health; including composted manures & minerals and green manure crops (see ad this paper).

For further information contact Gill Fry on 55734539 or visit www.networksw.com.au

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