



TAFCO
RURAL SUPPLIES



SMARTchoice

ISSUE 7 April 2009

Introduction

This is an update on the Commonwealth funded SMARTchoice project. The project has the general aim of assisting land owners in the Upper River Valleys of North East Victoria deal with land use change. The project has part time staff involvement and is being coordinated through TAFCO Rural Supplies in Myrtleford.

This newsletter will review some recent project work and give you some further information on district activities. If you want a detailed explanation on any of the topics mentioned in this newsletter contact Gary Baxter on 57521800.

Lucerne Production

It is quite obvious as you drive around the district that lucerne is a 'new' land use in the area. Through the SMARTchoice project we have conducted various activities to help new lucerne growers to 'do it better'. For example we have facilitated soil test and feed test opportunities for farmers who have attended project related meetings. We have also arranged for a dairy industry specialist to talk to lucerne growers to give a dairy farmer's perspective of fodder quality.

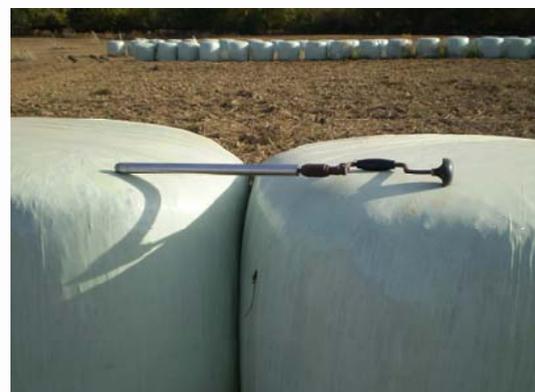


'New' lucerne crop in Gapsted. The block was sown to the Sardi 7 variety in May 2008 and has been cut on six occasions during 2009.



Some 'new' local lucerne producers with Scott Rathbone from CRC Agrisolutions.

Feed tests conducted through the SMARTchoice project have certainly demonstrated that the area has the potential to produce premium quality lucerne. Management obviously has a key role in ensuring a good paddock crop translates to the feed quality that various markets demand. These quality parameters include moisture, protein, percent neutral detergent fibre and energy levels. However, a typical feed test has many more measurement parameters included too.



The 60cm probe being used to take samples for 'feed' analyses



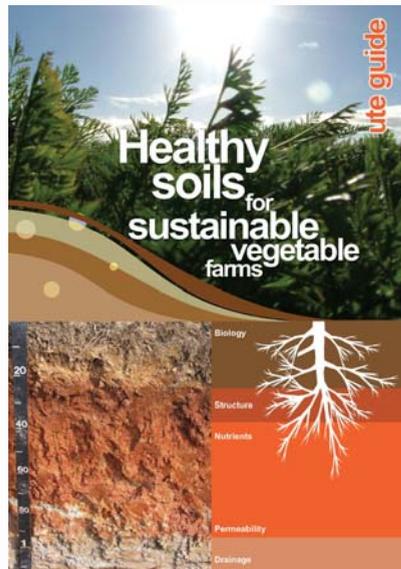
Primary Producer Proud



Soil Health

We keep saying that many district landowners are adapting to 'new' land uses. Crops include berries, nuts, and various vegetables or fodder species.

Through the SMART^{choice} project we are conducting activities in an effort to stimulate thinking on aspects of soil health. For example on 31 March there was a Healthy Soils Day conducted in Myrtleford. This opportunity was organised through Helena Whitman, an Environmental Manager with AUSVEG. Dr Alison Anderson and Jim Kelly are two authors of the Healthy Soils booklet (see cover in photo below). They presented the day in Myrtleford.



The Healthy Soils booklet was provided to all attendees at the Myrtleford Workshop. Whilst the title relates to vegetable cropping, the content is relevant to all crops. The booklet is geared to the evaluation and improvement of soil health which was also the focus of the workshop.

The Myrtleford Healthy Soils Workshop commenced with Jim Kelley giving a presentation on improving awareness of "ideal soil conditions" and learning how to manage any on-site limitations such as soil compaction or soil organic matter.



This photograph was supplied by Helena Whitman and shows Jim Kelley in action at the Myrtleford Healthy Soils Workshop.

One of the most topical soil issues that many producers discuss is soil pH. Jim Kelley certainly gave this subject significant time. He noted that the preferred pH measure used by most laboratories will be derived using a calcium chloride method. (*Land owners who have had a soil test conducted in recent times will have noted this*). Whilst now is not the time to attempt to give an explanation of laboratory techniques it is certainly worth mentioning that the implications of low soil pH can be significant.

For example, in strongly acidic soils containing high levels of aluminium, root growth can be restricted or crop persistence compromised.

The reality is that some of the soils in the area have moderately to strongly acidic soil pH in the topsoil but even more so in the subsoil. Whilst this type of variation is often seen, it may have implications for some deep rooted crops such as lucerne. The good thing is that pH anomalies can be amended over time. Many of the 'new' crops are deep rooted so subsoil characteristics can be significant. It is vitally important to be aware of your soil's characteristics and this was one of the key reasons for running the soil health day.

The second part of the Healthy Soils Workshop was in the field. A soil inspection pit had been prepared adjacent to recently planted berries in the Merriang area.

A soil pit may be something that many former tobacco growers are not that familiar with. However, these pits are regularly part of the process used in investigating the suitability of sites for horticulture. As an example of how seriously some horticultural businesses rely on soil pits, a group of local farmers visited a large horticultural enterprise in the Griffith area recently and heard that one soil pit per hectare was prepared prior to planting an intensive nut crop.



'Our' soil pit was an excavation of approximately 3 metres long x 1 metre wide x 1.2 metres deep.

The main aim of a pit inspection is to assess soil structure, drainage and moisture holding capacity.

Ideally soil should have pores for the drainage of water and also to 'hold' moisture and nutrients. Roots of many crops will travel well over a metre in depth so non compacted well structured soils are important. Soil organic matter is another factor that all of a sudden some local farmers have a keen interest in as they look at 'new' intensive crops.



This photograph was supplied by Helena Whitman and shows Dr Allison Anderson 'in the pit' assessing soil layers for evidence of pores.



This photograph was also supplied by Helena Whitman and shows Dr Allison Anderson and Jim Kelley 'in the pit' conducting some basic evaluation of soil texture characteristics. Well structured soils break up easily into small aggregates.

For anyone interested in a more detailed explanation of some of Jim Kelley or Alison Anderson's key discussion points, give Gary Baxter a call on 57521800. We have material and handouts used on the day that some of you may find useful.

If you are interested in lucerne:



Project staff plan to run farm walks on lucerne production.

These opportunities will utilise 'visiting experts' and may be organised at short notice. Therefore it will not always be practical to do a general mail out.

If you want to be notified of 'anything' the project conducts that may relate to lucerne let us know. This way we can call you at short notice if something is happening.



The media release below was provided by Kristy Youman who is with the Department of Primary Industries based at Wodonga. Kristy has been involved with the SMARTchoice Project with its focus on soil health and we are in turn assisting her by helping advertise the major workshop series. You will gather from the array of guest speakers at the workshop that soil health is a significant focus of funding organisations.

Get the Dirt on Soils

The Department of Primary Industries (DPI) are holding FREE workshops in the North East for land managers to provide information about soil organic matter, soil biology and the remarkable benefits of dung beetles.

DPI Project Officer Kristy Youman said caring for the health of soils is essential in any farming enterprise. Therefore these workshops can assist land managers in making informed decisions regarding the health of their soils and grazing management strategies.

Specialist speakers include Cathy Botta and Dr. Damian Bougoure from the DPI Healthy Soils Vic program and Belinda Pearce from the 'Do it with Dung - from the Mountains to the Murray' project, providing an insight to dung beetles and how they improve soil health.

"Due to the wide range of topics covered and valuable information the workshops will run from 9am to 5pm, which we appreciate are long days and we encourage landholders to attend as much as the workshop as possible," Ms Youman said.

The DPI DNA van, equipped with a mini-laboratory that allows soil samples to be processed in the field, will be onsite for land managers to look at during the lunch break.

Presentation notes, lunch, morning and afternoon tea will be provided.

Where:

- May 19 Tallangatta Valley Hall
- May 20 Walwa Golf Club
- May 21 Whorouly Community Hall

For further information please contact Kristy Youman at DPI Wodonga on 0428 124 118 or email kristy.youman@dpi.vic.gov.au. Bookings are essential; please RSVP by May 12, 2009.



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ABOUT TAFCO

The Tobacco & Associated Farmers Co-operative Limited (TAFCO) was formed in 1987 by tobacco growers to operate as an agricultural merchandising business to service tobacco growers and other primary producers.

Being a co-operative, profits are retained in the local communities and equitably distributed amongst members.

TAFCO has a broad horticultural base of 500 farmers throughout the Ovens, King, Kiewa and Beechworth areas - many operating multi-commodity farming enterprises. Over 600,000 \$1.00 shares are held by members.

See our website for details on becoming a member.

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