



Delivering workshops on low input farming approaches to soil health

June 2006 - June 2008

Location: Rathdownie, Gladstone, Toowoomba, Logan River, Maroochydore, Burdekin Catchment area, Clermont, Bowen, Mission Beach, Atherton and Gympie, QLD

Principal investigator: Greg Paynter, Biological Farmers of Australia supported by South East Catchments P/L and Burnett Mary Regional Group

The need

International and domestic trends suggest ongoing interest in organic food production, along with a matching interest from producers seeking to vary their farm management systems.

Mainstream agriculture has comparatively little knowledge on biological farm practices that boost soil health and generate direct economic benefits.

The drought of 2006/07 has heightened grower concerns about retention of soil moisture and there is increased focus on alternative management strategies to cope with fewer rain events.



How this project fits with HSSF objectives

This project will contribute to HSSF objectives of increasing adoption of farmer-based knowledge by delivering information about best management practice using organic soil management strategies for optimum soil health, production and catchment outcomes.

Project objectives

This project aims to influence the way farmers and landholders manage their soils.

Farmer participation in this project will see improvements in soil organic matter levels and biological activity leading to more stable, productive and resilient soils that contribute less sediment and nutrients to our waterways, enhance farm biodiversity and lead to long-term economic viability in our farming communities.

Methods

To conduct at least 20 catchment-scale workshops customised to different agricultural sectors, (cropping small and large scale, horticulture and animal production industries) and enterprises of differing sizes (ranging from 0.1ha to 5260ha) to bring reputable, relevant information to landholders.

Additionally, SEQ Catchments is using the workshops in its extension activities to achieve soil health target objectives.

There have been great crowds at workshops on low input farming approaches to soil healthy management, conducted by the Biological Farmers of Australia as part of the Healthy Soils programme.

Desired outcomes

To lift retained soil moisture levels through better understanding soil health management practices, involving techniques such as composting, humus levels in soil, optimal crop and pasture rotation management options.

To explore the importance of calcium in soil, to understand the role of trace elements and effects of soil health on plant nutrition and to explain the Brix measurement as a tool to indicate nutrient density of plant material in relation to the soil health status.

To link the effect of soil health on nutrient content of feeds and resulting animal and human health outcomes.

To identify local inexpensive resources, particularly recycled wastes, for productive outcomes.

Achievements to date

Land managers adopting strategies suggested in the workshops are reporting that they have been able to achieve some remarkable results in extremely dry conditions.

One producer has reported harvesting 57t/ha of forage sorghum silage, compared to the district average of 17.5t/ha, by utilising some of the material from the project.

Feedback sheets show that 90% of participants planned to instigate changes within two weeks of attending a workshop.

Eight participants have changed their fertility management to include use of animal manures rather than synthetic fertiliser inputs.

What is left to do?

An ongoing schedule of workshops is continuing across a widening base of farmer groups through alliances being formed with Catchment Management Authorities.

The project is getting enquiries from a larger potential audience than anticipated and is developing alliances with other NRM organisations such as the Network of Sustainable Diversified Agriculture, supported by Far North Queensland Natural Resource Management Ltd.

Healthy Soils for Sustainable Farms Programme is a Natural Heritage Trust programme, which is managed by Land & Water Australia and supported by the Grains Research and Development Corporation.

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