

## **Fleurieu dairy farmers reap rewards from soil nutrient testing**

Fleurieu dairy farmers are reaping the benefits of intensive soil nutrient testing and budgeting following their involvement in the three-year SA Dairy Soil Nutrient Project, delivered by DairySA.

Mount Compass farmer Rod Walker said, “As a result of this project, we grow more grass where we want more grass”.

Rod along with other members of the Mount Jagged Dairy Discussion Group have been involved in the project that is designed to help farmers identify, map and monitor soil acidity and nutrient levels in individual paddocks, with the aim of maximising fertiliser efficiency, reducing nutrient loads into the environment and managing soil acidity.

“Instead of putting nutrient on and letting it wash away, our pocket is better off and so is the environment” said dairy farmer Rob Mulhern. These comments along with other such positive reflections from the group provide an indication of the gains achieved by those involved in the DairySA project.

Fleurieu project coordinator Greg Mitchell from FP-AG said: “Farms involved in the project have focused hard on targeting nutrient application where it is needed and pulling it away from the more heavily loaded areas. In most cases this has resulted in better growth, better soil management and a better bottom-line.”

Participants in the Dairy Soil Nutrient project worked with Greg to develop management strategies to reduce acidity and maintain fertility, while reducing the risk of nutrient leaching. Activities have included soil sampling, development of farm acidity and nutrient loss risk maps, development, implementation and monitoring of farm fertility strategies. DairySA’s projects are farmer-driven with a strong focus on farm sustainability and profitability. They are practical and easily implemented on-farm.

All Fleurieu dairy farmers that participated in the Soil Nutrient project this year indicated they have enhanced their understanding and management of soil acidity as a result of being involved. The soil and nutrient monitoring and mapping have led to more strategic and targeted use of fertiliser across the majority of farms involved, with most seeing improvements in soil acidity.

“The project has given me the confidence to redirect fertiliser away from phosphorus to other nutrients [and] with a low budget we have been able to get good results”, Rod said.

Farmers in the group also recognise the longer-term benefits to not only to the soil and production, but also their bottom-line. “The changes we’ve made to phosphorus fertiliser application have paid for the soil tests for the next 30 years. The economic and environmental results make sense” said Nangkita farmer Michael Connor.

The most important learning for participants in the project was the crucial role of soil testing in establishing the fertility and therefore the nutrient requirements of different paddocks

and soil types. All participants indicated that the soil tests assisted them to plan their nutrient applications this year and most believe that their planned changes to fertiliser budgets have reduced their costs.

Other farmers in the group commented that it was important to *'Do enough soil testing to identify specific areas of difference in soil fertility – don't assume the whole farm is the same,'* and *'It is hard to guess your soil fertility levels unless you soil test. You are flying blind without them'.*

In addition to recognising the varying nutrient needs of soils on different areas of the farm, another lesson was the understanding that some soil types are more prone than others to leaching nutrients, so smaller applications of nutrients more often is a better way to go on these soils.

The 'Reducing Soil Acidification through Nutrient Management in South Australia: Dairy Soil Nutrients' project is funded by the Australian Government's Caring for our Country program, Dairy Australia and DairySA. The project aims to reduce soil acidity on dairy farms in the South East, Fleurieu, Barossa Mid North and Mt Lofty Ranges.