



Sharing knowledge improves soil management practice

Brad Watts manages two properties near Molesworth, Cremona Park (1000 acres) and Binbilla (250 acres). Cremona Park has been owned by the current owners for 30 years with some improvements but nothing of note to the pastures. Brad started working at Cremona about 10 years ago and bought the neighbouring property Binbilla about five years ago.

The entire 1250 acres is now managed as one venture with 400 head of cows in a self-replacing herd. Autumn calving is preferred. The property was initially divided into 27 paddocks, but has now been increased to 60 paddocks. Water supply has been improved with an additional 30 troughs and 8 km of pipe laid.

It's estimated that around 80% of the pastures are unimproved. As part of Brad's improvements, he started with annual rye grass and clover first for hay and silage production and then after that crop was harvested he put down a perennial rye grass and clover, which is expected to last up to five years.

About five years ago Brad decided to use a rotational system throughout the paddocks to help establish and improve the newly seeded pastures. Different parts of the herd generally only see a few areas of the farm rather than being given the entire farm to graze. Brad has noticed the cows tend to eat everything rather than selectively graze after reducing the size of the paddocks. This means he can now move them on average after one week. Brad uses the indicator of the grass being eaten down to about 50 mm.

Brad is a member of the Yea SoilCare Group, which is made up of farmers from Molesworth, Yea, Glenburn and Alexandra. SoilCare meetings usually consist of 12 people and a guest speaker is usually arranged. The meetings occur on-farm providing an opportunity for the landowners to catch up and discuss challenges, successes and issues they may have. The group is diverse with experienced and novice farmers, small and large landholders and different types of farming activities such as cattle, egg production and restaurant suppliers.

Brad is a relative newcomer to farming and says he has learnt a lot from his more experienced neighbours and through the



Brad Watts says sharing knowledge and focusing on methods that have worked for others is just one of the benefits of SoilCare groups

SoilCare network. He feels there are always new ideas and new technologies to uncover and if he hears of a good idea or something to trial he has the ability to allocate a small paddock to conduct his own trial and assess if it works.

Through the SoilCare network Brad attended a workshop organised by Judy Brookes and conducted by soil scientist Cath Botta, which went through step-by-step soil test interpretations. He believes this has been very worthwhile for people like him who are still learning about farming and soil management.

Brad also works with agronomist Matt Helder from Dindi Ag, who has presented to the Yea SoilCare group. Brad conducts regular soil tests and samples five to six different paddocks each year. Over time he plans to have tested across the entire farm to work out the overall soil fertility profile. He will continue to collect soil test data; it may take time but soil changes also take time so testing is of value.

Brad also uses a program called iFarm which was made available at another SoilCare workshop through Agriculture Victoria. iFarm provides an aerial shot of the farm and helps identify and integrate where pumps, pipes, valves, fences and tanks are located. It also allows farmers to input soil test data across their property. Data must be manually entered but ultimately this allows knowledge and data from the farm to be properly recorded.

Brad believes the greatest benefit of a group like Yea SoilCare is its flexibility.

"Other groups offer courses which take you away from your farm for days which is undesirable," he says. "The half day workshops put on by this group make them easy to attend and a great way to learn from people in the local area."

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