

From chemicals to **compost**

By Jaime Newborn

ESCALATING DEMAND FOR more natural agricultural products can be found in all quarters – with many major users of ‘organic allowed inputs’ arriving from backgrounds that are anything but chemical-free.

Katek Fertilizers, a BFA-registered allowed input company since 2002, has watched the change develop first-hand.

Katek director David Ernst says interest in Katek’s customised, naturally composted blends now comes from industries once notorious for their hard chemical use, such as cane and banana growing.

“In the past we haven’t been very active among cane farmers, who tended to be chemical-intensive operators. Now, that’s all changing. Once you start talking, they listen. The producers using Katek products are astute operators who are recognising that the more synthetic chemicals you put on over time, the more you have to keep using.”

David says the unique method used by Katek to manufacture compost – without subjecting blends to heat treatment – has proven particularly popular.

“Natural compost means growers can ‘re-compost’ down the track,” he says.

“When you heat-treat compost, you inevitably end up killing good microbes. Our compost is created over a 16-week period and turned every week for the first eight to 10 weeks. It’s a different process and it delivers different benefits.

“Basically, the final product is a living organism - millions of microbes continue to work and reproduce long after the initial application.”

Farmers ‘weaning off’ hard chemicals seem to appreciate the concept, and Katek compost has been trialled on everything from pumpkins to prawns.

David says he is often surprised at the way his product is used.

“The different ways farmers are innovating and adopting the same product to suit their needs is quite amazing – I learn something new every time I talk to them. For instance, in the banana industry, there are growers who put Katek Super Growth in a drill line under the plants instead of the chemical



spray they would traditionally apply.

“Beef operators use it on their pasture if they’re certified for US export markets because it’s an accepted product under the USDA NOP Organic Standards.

“It’s even being used in the prawn industry, which I hadn’t realised could be done. Supergrowth is applied to promote the growth of algae in the ponds as a food source for the prawns.”

He says the good results also speak for themselves.

“We had a fruit farmer out at Mundubbera in Queensland who planted 9600 citrus trees. He used our compost for this process and only lost two plants.

“For farmers, it’s about evidence. It’s very much a ‘look over the fence’ process – it

only takes one grower to try it.”

He says there’s evidence a new breed of farmers is emerging. “They’re interested in biological processes and recognising that the natural build-up of humus and silica in the soil can both protect and nourish their plants – it’s rewarding to see.”

But he says each grower needs to assess their situation on a case-by-case basis.

“Every area, every crop, every farmer has a different story.”

He says the next step for Katek will be to focus on soil silicone deficiencies.

“This is quite common in some of the cane lands around Bundaberg, Qld, where they’re now trying to grow horticultural crops. We want to develop a natural fertiliser that can help combat that.” ☺