BIOLOGICAL FARMERS OF AUSTRALIA

BFA Press Release 19th Feb 2008

Faster flood relief for organic systems

Less soil is eroded, and crops are more likely to withstand days of water logging following torrential rain, through higher humus levels advocated in organic farm systems.

Experts say high humus levels will enhance farm resilience in all extreme climate fluctuations in the future.

“Organic farming systems do not result in erosion to the same degree as conventional because they stabilize soil structure by fostering organic matter and the release of exudates that aggregate into larger and more stable forms,” says soil technician and *BFA* spokesperson, Mr. Greg Paynter.

“Studies have shown soil resilience is built through the creation of stable humus. Farm systems that utilise this are more able to withstand climate extremes (1).”

“Increasing levels of humus is the cornerstone of organic soil management.”

Adam Willson, Director of *Soil Systems Australia* says soil rich in humus and organic compounds can retain moisture in the dry; and improve drainage in intense wet periods. .

He says this is particularly important following the drought.

“Land tends to have been over-utilised – often graziers won’t de-stock during dry times - and the combination of bare soil and excess water can result in intense ecological and agricultural damage,” he says.

He says the numbers measuring this damage are staggering.

“Just 0.3mm of lost topsoil leads to 4.4 tonnes of soil p/ Ha moving downstream *(roughly the weight of an African female elephant*).”

Mr. Doug Haas, Chair of *BFA* and *s*mall intensive crop grower has seen the benefits.

“As a farmer who’s had almost 900mm of rain in the past month, I believe soil management and the accumulation of humus in a natural system has lead to a more resilient land,” he says.

Mr. Willson says grazing management in particular was critical because land subjected to heavy grazing or recent tilling eroded easily.

“Farming with as close as possible to 100% ground cover *(vegetation)* is one of the only things to stop this*”* he says.

An independent report to the Australian government (2) states in Australia, soil erosion is responsible for increasing sediment loads in rivers and estuaries.

Areas worst affected include extensively cleared wheat and sheep zones in east and south-west Australia.

The report states nearly 19 000 tonnes of total phosphorus and 141 000 tonnes of total nitrogen are estimated to be transported downriver to the coast each year from agricultural activity.

Mr. Willson says high phosphorous runoff has led to the development of blue-green algae in water ways; and that the final settlement of sediment in oceans was responsible for arid marine ‘dead zones.’

Mr. Paynter says further examples of resilient organic systems in climate extremes also included:

- A cropping trial *(DAFF Farm Innovative Program, Dalby)* where conventional wheat yielded 2.2t/ha and the organic trial 3.3. t/ha, with better protein levels in the worst drought in 100 years;

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- On-farm dairy trials in QLD where organic farm practises averaged 57.5t/ha of silage (stock feed) compared to a district average of 17.5.T/ha in conventional in a year of low quality irrigation water

- (1)Data: Study: *The performance of organic and conventional cropping systems in an extreme climate year* (D.W Lotter, R Seidel & W. Liebhardt) *http://donlotter.net/lotter_ajaa_article.pdf*
- (2) Data: Report: *Australia – State of the Environment* http://www.environment.gov.au/soe/2006/index.html

The BFA has a vision for the organic industry in Australia - to grow organic food sales to 10 per cent of the food market in Australia by 2020. Less contribution to environmental erosion is one good reason to buy organic and assist the organic industry to achieve its goal. More information is available at http://www.bfa.com.au

Ends.

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