

Soil test Interpretation information to Assist Decision Making on Farms

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A recent soil-health project in the Goulburn Broken Catchment focused on helping farmers to interpret their soil-test results, and to understand the management implications for on-farm decision making. The idea for this 'mini' extension project came from a member of one of the active Landcare groups in the catchment. There has been a long history of soil-health extension in the catchment that has encouraged soil testing, liming acid soils and managing pastures to maintain appropriate levels of ground cover. Despite this long extension history and the plethora of resources now available online, many farmers find soil tests complex, difficult to understand, and are not confident in converting the soil test numbers to a practical on-farm decision.

The project developed an easily accessible farmer resource, written in lay terms – a 56-page, coil-bound booklet *Understanding your soil test: step by step*. A collaborative writing process was used, involving farmers, extension practitioners and soil scientists. A soil-test interpretation workshop was developed to launch the resource.

The first print run of 2000 copies was taken up within the first four months of its release, prompting a reprint of 2000. The original workshop to launch the resource was oversubscribed and three more were run to satisfy demand. Two liming workshops were conducted in response to participant feedback.

These results were unexpected. Semi-structured interviews were used to follow up both participants of the workshops and people ordering multiple copies of the booklet resource from outside the catchment and state. The interviews explored perceptions of the extension practices used and the impact on farmer decision making.

We have learnt more about the challenges farmers face understanding complex soil-test results and the implications for on-farm decision making, often involving large financial inputs and risk.

This paper explores the lessons learnt from this project for extension practice.