MEDIA RELEASE

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Statewide study aims to aid dairy farm practices

A group of Tasmanian dairy farms are reaping the financial and environmental rewards from a recent study highlighting the importance of effectively monitoring nutrient and fertiliser use.

Seventeen commercial dairy farms are taking part in a three-year study looking at water use and nutrient management. The farms are from the Derwent Valley, Ringarooma and Flowerdale catchments.

The project is being conducted by Scott Carlson, project officer with the Tasmanian Institute of Agricultural Research's (TIAR) Dairy Centre in Burnie, who has worked one-on-one with farmers across the catchments monitoring soil moisture and nutrient levels.

Now into its final year, Mr Carlson said many farmers involved in the project were making better decisions regarding their management of fertiliser and irrigation use.

"Through the study and advice given by the team, farms are really starting to see the benefits of effectively monitoring the use of nutrients and fertilisers, both from an environmental and financial point of view," he said.

Full results from the study will be presented at field days being held in March throughout the State. Sites and dates include: North East - March 11, Ringarooma (Stan and Geoff Cox); South – March 10, Derwent Valley (Grant and Melanie Rogers); and North-West – March 12, Flowerdale (Wayne and Linda Hansen).

The project involves each farm's soil being analysed for moisture levels and nutrient concentrations with farmers keeping records of fertiliser use, pasture and milk production and imported feed data.

"The project aims to improve the efficiency of water and fertiliser use by mapping out a dairy farm's actual soil moisture and nutrient levels, and then using this information to adjust irrigation and fertiliser use according to industry best management guidelines," Mr Carlson said.

"Participating farms in the study reflected a positive result in water use efficiency, with sites continuing to exceed the industry average of one tonne of pasture dry matter grown per mega litre of irrigation water applied.

"This was achieved through farmers monitoring their soil moisture using equipment installed as part of the project, and adjusting their irrigation to maintain soil moisture in the desired range, and to maximise pasture production."

Mr Carlson said the industry also relied heavily on a high level of fertiliser inputs to support pasture-based systems.

He said at the start of the project, testing showed that most farms had a surplus of phosphorus (P) and potassium (K), which can pose a risk to the environment due to run-off processes.

Throughout the project, most farms managed their fertiliser inputs, decreasing both their P and K levels towards the desired agronomic ranges, resulting in substantial savings on fertiliser use.

He said the cost benefit analysis undertaken as part of the project showed potential savings between $29 and $636/ha, by targeting nutrients more effectively.

He also said research continued to show no benefit to pasture production in having P and K levels above the desired agronomic ranges.

The three-year project is funded by the Federal Government's National Landcare Program, in association with DairyTAS, Impact, Incitec and ANZ.

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