

POTASH ALERT FOR FLEURIEU DAIRY PASTURES



Soil test information indicates many Fleurieu dairy farmers are not applying enough potash fertiliser to their dryland pastures.

In recent years, dairy farmers rightly focused on increasing N and P fertiliser inputs on their farms, and have been rewarded with better pasture growth and quality.

But along the way, some have not increased potash (K) inputs to match the extra productivity. Consequently, many paddocks are now suffering from potash deficiency, especially paddocks used every year for hay and silage.

This problem became apparent at recent farmer group meetings held as part of Project 3030. Some Network farms are seeing soil potash levels decline in their silage paddocks in spite of applying the equivalent of up to 160 kg/ha of muriate of potash fertiliser each year.

Farmers unhappy with pasture growth could suspect potash deficiency as a problem if they observe;

- a steady decline in growth over several years – especially silage and hay paddocks.
- less clover growth in paddocks – more evident in dung and urine patches
- greater incidence of weeds of infertility (eg. silvergrass, flatweed, sorrel)
- these problems are more serious on sandy soils

Of course, other nutrient deficiencies could cause these symptoms, and farmers should use soil tests to properly assess soil fertility. But it appears that potash deficiency is a hidden but growing problem on many Fleurieu farms.

Conserved fodder carries a lot of potash (15-30 kg potash per tonne DM), so hay and silage cuts rob a lot of potash from harvest paddocks. Similarly, potash is deposited in areas where fodder is fed out.

Farmers should consider the following strategies to minimise the incidence of potash deficiencies;

- rotate paddocks that are used for silage and hay production each year.
- Aim to feed out fodder as widely as possible across the farm. Feed out fodder in back sections of paddocks.
- Use routine soil test to monitor levels of potash and other key nutrients.
- Apply a greater proportion of potash inputs onto silage harvest paddocks.

Farmers should aim to maintain soil potash levels at around 200 ppm (at least 150 ppm on sandier soils). Alternatively, exchangeable potash levels should be maintained at around 5% of total CEC. If in doubt, farmers should consult a reputable fertiliser reseller or agronomist.

If potash is required, limit spreading rates to no more than 50 kg K/ha at each application. Higher rates per application could result in unacceptable leaching losses on sandy soils.

Do NOT apply potash within 3 months to paddocks used for pre-calving cattle. Increased potash levels in forage can sometimes pre-dispose calving cows to milk fever.

Potash deficiency is unlikely on heavy, cracking soils, and in paddocks where dairy effluent is spread.

GREG MITCHELL, Project 3030 mitchellg@chariot.net.au (: 5th July'06)