New soils project for FNQ

The Subtropical Dairy Program has recently approved a new soils project for Far North Queensland (FNQ). The project entitled 'Improved management of phosphorous on Atherton Tableland dairy farms' was initiated by the FNQ Regional group, chaired by Bill Tranter. The project is funded by the Subtropical Dairy Program.

Dr John Armour (Senior soil scientist) and Kev Shaw (NQ agronomist) compiled the project after lengthy liaison with the FNQ Regional group. The project aims to build on the work done as part of the Dairying Better n' Better soil and nutrient management planning program in which farmers were encouraged to use soil testing to determine their fertiliser inputs. Unfortunately soil testing is not used routinely to determine fertiliser inputs across the FNQ dairy industry, despite the fact that feed grown on farm is the cheapest feed resource. The quantity and quality of feed grown on farm relies heavily on soil fertility and the availability of key nutrients in the right amounts.

Soil testing carried out as part of the soil and nutrient management planning program indicated that soil phosphorous (P) levels is high on 50% of existing dairy farms. This is due to many years of high P application and suggests that P applications can be reduced in many cases. A reduction in P applications in these situations would not reduce pasture production, however it would mean reduced fertiliser costs to the farmer.

Through a number of project activities, the project aims to promote the use of soil test results to determine fertiliser applications on dairy farms. Initially, data will be collected from six farms with a history of soil testing to determine trends in soil nutrient status over time. The Dairying Better 'n' Better soil testing database will also be reviewed as part of the project. A workshop will be held to present the results of the data collection and review process. At the workshop, participants will learn about the key aspects of an effective soil testing program which includes; sampling, laboratory selection, interpretation of results, and development of an effective fertiliser/concentrate program.

It is hoped that the results from this project can be used to develop future projects which will further benefit the FNQ dairy industry.