

CROPPING

Low-rainfall crop success

Organic wheat thrives on EP

By EMMA PARTRIDGE

SIMILAR to many farmers, Murray and Leigh Watkinson, Nunjirkompita, were finding it hard to sleep at night when fertiliser prices soared to \$2000 a tonne last year.

The two brothers, who crop in a marginal area 60 kilometres east of Ceduna, decided their inputs needed to be drastically reduced.

And while their bills were going thorough the roof, their 2000 hectares of wheat and oat crops were not responding to any amount of fertiliser.

They practised traditional farming methods, regularly applying chemical fertilisers such as MAP for their cereal cropping.

Murray said they noticed the health of their crops had been diminishing over the years.

"They just seemed dead – it didn't matter how much fertiliser we were putting on, nothing was responding," he said.

"The fertiliser we were using had no trace elements in it and we used to have a lot of white heads in our crop."

Seeking to cut inputs and increase soil health, they stumbled upon Neutrog's organic range of fertilisers during a Google search.

5 Critical Factors

- 1 New products increase crop health
- 2 Inputs cut by up to \$60/ha
- 3 No spray needed for rust
- 4 Boost for marginal country
- 5 'Life' back in soil

"We were really looking for a cheaper option and something that could boost the quality of our crops," Murray said.

They decided to switch to a product called Undercover because it was organic-based with the full range of naturally occurring micronutrients.

It was also boosted by 20 per cent DAP along with increased levels of zinc and manganese.

They thought the product would improve their soil health while at the same time the inclusion of the DAP made them less apprehensive about changing over to an organic product.

Undercover was applied last year at seeding through a Flexi-Coil airseeder with 32-millimetre hoses, at about 80



FERTILISER SWITCH: Soaring fertiliser prices and decreasing crop quality encouraged Murray Watkinson to switch to organic fertiliser.

kilograms a hectare.

In 2008, they trialed a paddock with 150 kilograms of MAP/ha alongside an area with 80kg/ha of Undercover and noticed no difference in yields – but that came with a massive input reduction.

"Our crops did not burn-off like they normally do when chemical fertilisers were used," Murray said. "Screenings were lower and protein was higher, despite receiving less rain."

"Last year we learnt that phosphorous, in isolation of having a balance of nutrients, is not as crucial as we once thought it to be, and as a consequence this experience has given us the confidence to switch to a totally-organic product," he said.

"We believe that the organic side of things will help us get life back into our soil."

In order to further cut costs this year, they switched to a completely organic fertiliser called Rapid Raiser, applied at 80kg/ha, which cut inputs down to \$39/ha.

"The crop stood up a lot better and looked so much healthier," Murray said.

"Although our yields remained the same, you could see the wheat had a darker green colour, and we had definitely improved the quality of

our crops."

After working-up the ground with a prickle chain before seeding, they applied 1 litre/ha of Roundup.

At seeding, 250 millimetres a hectare to 350mm/ha of Ester or MCPA was used to control broadleaf weeds.

Murray said the crops were looking "good and healthy". He was reaping about 1.5-2t/ha of wheat in an area that received an annual rainfall of only 250mm.

"We work on economics and I would like to keep using Rapid Raiser as long as we can afford it – we are in a marginal area so we have to keep our costs down as much as possible," he said.

He said that although fertiliser prices had plummeted to about \$500/ha, prices were sure to surge again when the \$A dollar returns to normal levels.

The only downside was the cost of freight to the Eyre Peninsula.

But with a healthier plant there was no need to spray for diseases such as rust.

A number of people had driven past their 'Rusty Park' property and commented on how healthy the crops look, encouraging a few neighbours to trial the organic-based fertilisers.

MyTake

with PAUL GILES

Neutrog Fertilisers – South Australia



Overview:

Neutrog organic-based fertiliser aids in unlocking nutrients previously tied up in the soil. Organic fertilisers help to supply the full range of macro and micro plant nutrients in an available and stable form. It can provide living microbiology which stimulates the natural processes that occur in the soil. It also encourages stronger root growth, and provides a greater surface area from which to draw nutrients and moisture from the soil. It retains up to 70 per cent of its own weight in water and can contain up to 55pc organic matter.

The good:

Organic-based fertilisers help to increase organic matter levels and strengthen the water holding capacity of the soil. They help to improve resistance to pest and disease and increases the plant's ability to resist frost and heat stress. They can help to increase protein levels, reduce screenings and improve soil structure and tilth. Neutrog fertilisers are manufactured in South Australia and are alternatives to imported fertilisers and help to reduce their carbon footprint.

The bad:

The products are not ideal to store in a field bin for more than seven to 10 days. Product should not be repeatedly augered, because the organic product will tend to crumble and form dust.

The ugly:

Smaller airseeders that run secondary hoses less than 20 millimetres may have flow issues. The product needs to be stored out of weather because otherwise moisture will cause product to stick together.

My top 5 tips:

1. Be patient, because crops will have their biggest growth in the last six weeks of the growing cycle and will continue to improve the longer these products are used.
2. Make sure you have adequate storage when ordering.
3. Organic matter and microbial activity are the keys to unlocking the phosphorous in your soil.
4. Do not try to compare organic fertilisers against their chemical counterparts using the NPK methodology alone.
5. The only way to judge this for yourself is to 'just try it'.

Need to know more?

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NICE RESULT: Neighbours say Murray and Leigh Watkinson's farm look much healthier after the brothers applied organic-based fertiliser.

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