

# **PRESS RELEASE**

## **How Long Does a Soil Test Last?**

A farmer once told me he didn't need a soil test because he already had one. It was dated "May 1946" and was done in the neatest handwriting I had ever seen, but it was still about 50 years old!

Like so many others, he was worried about declining productivity, but to him it was the fertiliser that had stopped working, not the soil test. So in the end he stopped using fertiliser as well. At least he didn't have to worry about how to handle his surplus pasture in Spring!

The trouble is that we have become conditioned to think of soil tests only in terms of fertiliser. So it seems natural that if you are growing the same plants, they will need the same fertiliser – no matter how old the test. Of course, things are seldom as straightforward as this.

So what should we expect from a soil test and how long before we will need another one?

If your interest is in sustainable production and you want to know what is going on in your soil so you can better manage *both* soil and productivity, you will need a fairly detailed analysis and should be looking for changes on a regular basis. This is because soil is a complex and dynamic system that is continually changing and adapting to factors in the environment, as well as your management inputs.

For this kind of approach, the ideal situation is to repeat the soil test every 12 months. Certainly, it would be important to do this if you are busy with things that could be called 'developmental' (eg. Starting out on a new property, implementing a whole-farm plan, etc.). In other circumstances, you should be OK with repeat tests every 2 years. If you let things go much longer than this you run the risk of having things go backwards before you find out what is happening. In other words, changes in the soil do not necessarily translate into visible changes in productivity straight away. So while you may spot a change after 3 years and correct it, you may still have to work through a bit of a productivity slump before getting back to where you were before. Over the long term, repeating soil tests too infrequently could see you only "treading water", rather than achieving the progress you were targeting.

The most important thing to remember about soil tests is that they provide you with a rational basis for making management decisions. Without a current soil test, you will be replacing decision-making with guesswork.

Another thing to remember about getting a repeat test is that soil is not just 'dirt', but a dynamic ecosystem. Soil not only changes from year to year, but also from one season to the next. This makes consistency an absolute must. Repeat tests **MUST** be done over the same area and at the same time of the year if they are to give you a good comparison and show real changes.

The 'Golden Rules' are:

- Make sure your soil test is as detailed as possible,
- Repeated it every 12 months to 2 years and
- Be as consistent as possible with the way you collect the sample and the time of year you do it.

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