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Stock Health Begins in the Soil

Good, healthy stock are vital in any successful pastoral farming enterprise. The trouble is, stock are not always healthy, nor do they always seem to thrive. Now of course, no farmer worthy of the name, starts the season with the intention of growing stock which do not do well. Yet despite this, every year, millions of dollars are spent on veterinary medicines and related costs trying to overcome this problem. In fact, for most farmers, veterinary costs have become a necessary and accepted budget item, even though they significantly erode the “bottom line.”

There are many reasons why stock do poorly or lose condition. One key factor which is often overlooked is the condition of the underlying soil.

Sometimes farming is a bit like trying to hold down a dozen pin pong balls with one hand in a basin of water – there always seem to be a few that get away from you. It is not easy to keep everything under control and in balance. It is also easy to miss “the big picture” and be continually fire-fighting whatever is the current most pressing issue. Sadly, veterinary medicine is a bit like the “ambulance at the foot of the cliff”. Whereas what’s really needed is a longer range view and a willingness to try and understand “why the vehicle went over the cliff” in the first place.

Generally, if a soil is healthy and well balanced both in terms of nutrients and biological inhabitants and functioning, then the plants growing in that soil will also be well balanced nutritionally and less subject to insect or other parasite attack. When the plants are healthy and vigorous, there is little need for chemical intervention (with drenches, pesticides and herbicides etc) for, as a general rule, if the soil is healthy and the plants growing in the soil are healthy, then the animals which are grazing those plants will also be healthy as well.

For many farmers, spring is the time to apply fertiliser. This is done, according to conventional wisdom, to either improve or at least maintain productivity. The problem is that adding high levels of just a few nutrients in the form of inorganic salt based chemicals is often harmful to soil biology. The chemical shock and resulting nutrient imbalance can kill off and injure the unseen creatures which inhabit the soil and which are also the true drivers of productivity. Sadly, for many farmers, the biggest benefit of applying fertiliser is not the increase in production but the psychological belief that “all will be well now.”

Fertiliser is essential. The modern, highly stocked, intensive farming regime wouldn’t survive without it. But please, think about the reasons why you apply fertiliser rather than simply doing “what we’ve always done.”