IMPROVED GRAZING PRODUCTION ON NON-WETTING SANDS

COMPOST RATE CASE STUDY

This case study explores how compost application affects soil fertility and biomass production after clay spreading.

AT A GLANCE

Challenges

Sandy soils are naturally low in organic carbon and are deficient in most essential plant nutrients.

Opportunities

Clay spreading can overcome multiple sandy soil constraints, but the process is very disruptive. It's important to support the soil to quickly recover its chemical, physical and biological function.

I knew this paddock would be low in nutrients and organic matter after clay spreading. I was keen to explore different ways to supply these, while also supporting soil microbes. This trial lets us test compost application rates and measure changes in soil biology and feed production over time.

Hamish Verco
Owner Manager, Wee-Gun Western Flat

BACKGROUND

A 15ha pasture paddock at Western Flat, SA, was selected to demonstrate strategies to restore soil function following clay application and incorporation. The paddock is characterised by jumbled dunes with deep sandy soils (Image 1) and sporadic heavier flats.

Soil sampling in 2021 confirmed the sand dunes to be severely water repellent and deficient in phosphorus and potassium, with organic carbon below 1%. It has low capacity for nutrient retention throughout (cation exchange capacity <1.0 cmol/kg below 10cm), but did not have high soil strength.

Clay spreading is common practice to alleviate water repellence and 250 t/ha of clay material was applied across the paddock in early 2022, before being incorporated with a disc plough in autumn (Image 2).

A survey with local farmers in 2021 showed 65% were interested in testing multispecies pastures and over 70% wanted to see organic amendments demonstrated in their environment.

In May 2022, compost treatments were applied on plots 1.1 ha in size to boost biological function and nutrient supply using a custom blended compost.

Four different compost rates are tested against a fertiliser control (Images 3-7).

The paddock was sown to multispecies pastures in 2022 and 2023 and has been monitored annually. The demonstration is in its final year of monitoring in 2024.

Image 1. Soil profile from the deep sand dune prior to clay and compost being applied.

TREATMENT DETAILS

1) Custom Fertiliser: a blend of mono-ammonium phosphate, sulphate of potash, copper and molybdenum ($1873/t ex Naracoorte; GST Incl.) was spread at 160 kg/ha to supply 11N, 24P, 20K, 9S, 1Cu and 0.04Mo kg/ha ($299/ha + $41/ha spreading cost).

2) Custom Compost: an organically certified humic compost was supplied locally from Mulbarton Compost at Padthaway at a cost of $174/t (GST Incl.) delivered and spread. 29 kg of Guano, an organic phosphorus fertiliser (12.6% P), was blended into each tonne of compost prior to application. Nutrient supply (kg/ha) for each compost rate (t/ha) is shown below.

Rate t/ha	N	P	K	S	Ca
1	11	3.6	10	1.6	44
2	22	7.2	20	3.3	88
4	44	14.4	40	6.6	176
8	88	29	80	13.2	352

Image 2. Aggregates of clay mixed into sand.

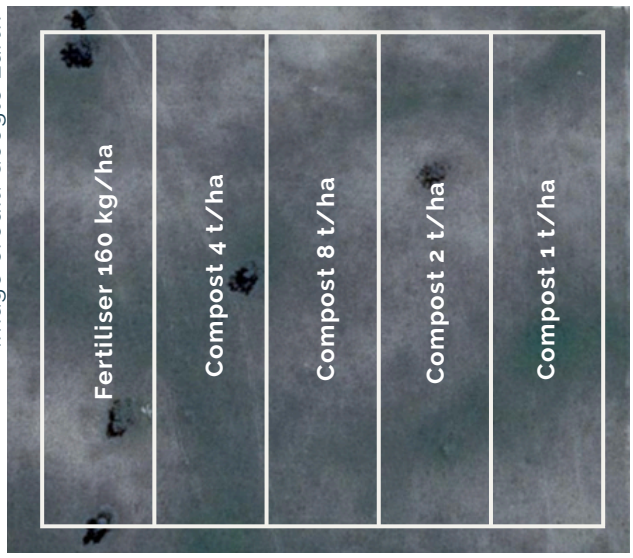

Image credit: Google Earth

Image 3. Trial map (5 treatments x 1.1ha).

Image 4. Compost applied @1 t/ha.

Image 5. Compost applied @2 t/ha

Image 6. Compost applied @4 t/ha.

Image 7. Compost applied @8 t/ha.

Measurements: Normalised difference vegetation index was measured annually using a Trimble Greenseeker by recording 5 transects across the dune crest in each plot.

In 2022, dry matter was assessed by harvesting 0.5m2 quadrats to ground level in 12 locations per treatment. In 2023, a rising plate meter was used, recording 15 dry matter measures across three transects in each plot, calibrated with pastrue cuts. Composite subsamples were retained for moisture and quality assessment.

Image 8. Fertiliser 160 kg/ha - NDVI 0.39

Image 9. Compost 1 t/ha - NDVI 0.30

Image 10. Compost 8 t/ha - NDVI 0.28

YEAR 1 RESULTS

A mixed species pasture was sown on 15 May 2022, comprised of Balansa, Arrowleaf and Rose clovers, Paraggio medic, vetch, Blast ryegrass, Saia oats, ryecorn, and tillage radish at a rate of 69 kg/ha ($108/ha).

The seed was sown with 130 kg/ha of SMS Guano (12% P) after being treated with a fluid bio-stimulant comprised of compost extract, worm extract, seaweed powder, milk powder, molasses, humic powder, fish hydolysate, wood vinegar, mycorrhizal fungi and N fixing bacteria. The brew was applied to the seed through an auger and allowed to dry prior to planting. The paddock was sown following the hill contours to encourage water infiltration and reduce rill erosion.

Normalised difference vegetation index (NDVI) results showed enhanced growth in the Fertiliser treatment in July. By September, the 2 and 8 t/ha compost treatments were as good as or better than the Fertiliser treatment, as confirmed by dry matter yield (Table 1).

Table 1. 2022 plant production measures: Normalised difference vegetation index (NDVI) in July and September; dry matter yield (DM t/ha) in September, prior to grazing; DM in November, following recovery from grazing; dry matter digestibility (DMD); crude protein (CP); metabolisable energy (ME). Treatments with the same letter are not significantly different.

Treatment	NDVI July	NDVI Sept	DM t/ha September	DM t/ha November	DMD %	CP %	ME MJ/kg
Fertiliser 160 kg/ha	0.39 a	0.69 b	0.67 a	2.77 a	58.7	12.7	8.5
Compost 1/ha	0.30 b	0.60 c	0.38 b	2.04 c	60.1	11.7	8.7
Compost 2 t/ha	0.28 b	0.77 a	0.55 a	2.59 ab	59.6	13.2	8.6
Compost 4 t/ha	0.29 b	0.60 c	0.40 b	2.42 b	60.6	13.6	8.8
Compost 8 t/ha	0.28 b	0.72 ab	0.57 a	2.48 ab	56.9	16.1	8.2
LSD (p=0.05)	0.042	0.046	0.14	0.34	-	-	-

YEAR 1 RESULTS

Winter pasture growth was slow in 2022, owing to continuous cool and cloudy conditions, hence less than a ton of **dry matter** (DM) had grown by September (Table 1). The paddock was grazed in mid September and recovered well through a relatively cool and wet spring.

The Fertiliser, 2 t/ha and 8 t/ha Compost treatments were the best and most consistent performing, producing >0.55 t/ha DM in September and >2.45 t/ha in November.

These higher yielding treatments had lower dry matter digestibility than the 1 and 4 t/ha Compost rates, but crude protein was considerably higher in the 8 t/ha treatment (data not replicated).

Pasture composition and maturity showed some differences between treatments, with the Compost treatments supporting greater legume composition that was still actively growing in November (see Images 11-13); the Fertiliser treatment was beginning to senesce.

Image 11. Fertiliser - 2.77 t/ha

Image 12. Compost 2 t/ha - 2.59 t/ha

Image 13. Compost 8 t/ha - 2.48 t/ha

YEAR 2 RESULTS

The paddock was sown to a multispecies fodder crop on 15 April, composed of Saia oats, ryecorn, triticale, Blast ryegrass, Crimson, Rose, Arrowleaf and Balansa clovers, vetch, tillage radish, buckwheat, chicory, plantain, cocksfoot, lucerne and phacelia (totaling 51.4 kg/ha). A blend of compost + 14 kg/t of guano was spread on 17 April at approximately 1.07 t/ha.

Unfortunately, Veldt grass germinated across the paddock in 2023, competing heavily with the sown pasture, with no post-sowing herbicide options available for control. Establishment of the desirable pasture species was substantially impacted as a result (Images 14-15).

Nonetheless, **Dry matter** yields largely followed the same trend as in 2022, whereby the treatment with custom fertiliser applied yielded the highest DM (cumulative 1 t/ha more than the 1 t/ha compost treatment; Figure 1). In 2023 the 8 t/ha compost treatment was the next best performer, adding 0.94 t of DM above the 1 t/ha treatment; it also had better forage quality (data not shown).

Assessments of soil structure were conducted in October, following poor pasture recovery after the September grazing. Surface soils were found to be very compacted, owing to a thick surface layer of dispersed/pugged clay. Areas with better incorporation supported greater pasture diversity and biomass (Images 16-17).

Image 14. Fertiliser - 2.19 t/ha

Image 15. Compost 4 t/ha - 2.05 t /ha

YEAR 2 RESULTS

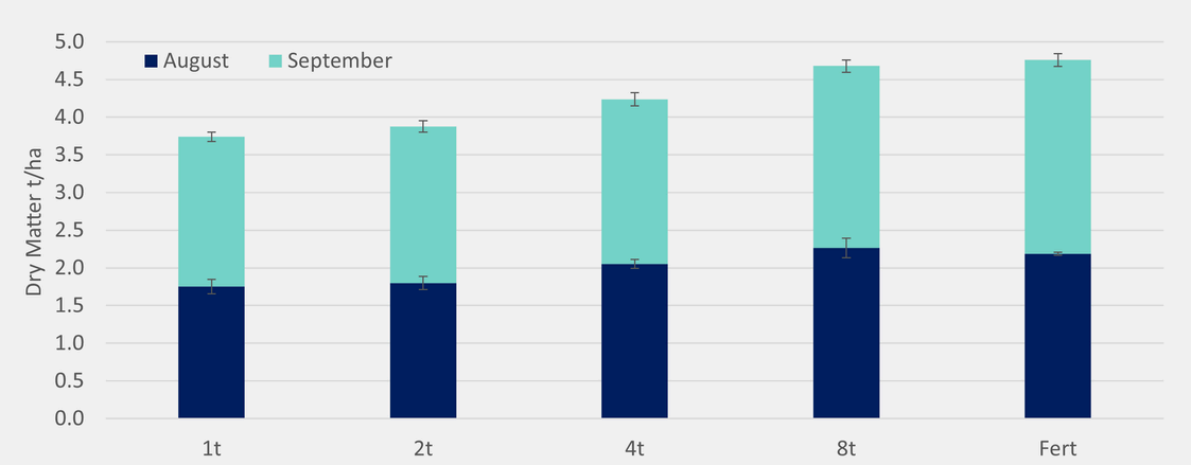

Figure 1. Cumulative pasture dry matter yield (t/ha) at Wee Gun measured in August and September 2023.

Image 16. Poor clay/pasture.

Image 17. Good clay/pasture.

Image 18. Imants Deep Ripper + Spader

WHERE TO NEXT?

In April 2024 the clay was re-incorporated into the surface layers using an Imants combination Deep Ripper + Spader (Image 18). The paddock was then sown to a fodder crop consisting of Saia oats, vetch, tillage radish, forage and winter brassica; monitoring of soil physical, chemical and biological fertility and pasture yields will continue.

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to Hamish Verco for access to paddocks, equipment and resources to deliver this case study. Thanks also to the project Steering Committee and Mulbarton Compost for ongoing support.

This project is supported by **Meat and Livestock Australia** and the **Coorong Tatiara Local Action Plan - Coorong and Tatiara District Councils**.

Project Duration: July 2019 to June 2026

Project manager: Dr Melissa Fraser, Soil Function Consulting.
E:mel@soilfunction.com.au M:0407 773 369

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mla MEAT & LIVESTOCK AUSTRALIA