

DUNG BEETLES: THE ULTIMATE FARM WORKERS!

John Feehan, SOILCAM

A series of four field days were held with John Feehan, at Ladysmith (30 July 2013), Humula (31 July 2013), Illabo (13 August 2013) and Junee (14 August 2013).

John Feehan, the internationally renowned dung beetle expert, joined us recently to help landholders learn all about dung beetles and how to make use of them. John was a member of the CSIRO team tasked with introducing bovine dung beetles into Australia and now works privately researching, collecting and releasing suitable dung beetle species into grazing regions across Australia and internationally.

John's organisation, SOILCAM, is based in Canberra where he coordinates the largest collection and redistribution of dung beetles in the world. As a result of his research and field work over many years, John is now able to supply the species suitable for particular locations to ensure maximum beetle activity through different seasons.

John led a series of free field day for locals, funded as part of Murrumbidgee Landcare's Cross Property Planning project. John's passion and knowledge about dung beetles were immediately evident, and the day proved to be an enjoyable and informative one for the large group of landholders who came along.

John spoke enthusiastically about the extraordinary benefits of dung beetles. Some of the jobs that dung beetles carry out include:

- Aerating the soil
- Digging through compacted soil
- Helping to store soil carbon
- Deepening the topsoil by slowly cultivating and turning it over to a depth of 300 mm
- Increasing rainwater penetration and improving groundwater retention
- Burying dung nutrients, including nitrogen and phosphorous, in the plant root zone
- Reducing bush fly and parasite breeding colonies.

Imagine a machine that could do all of this without using any precious fossil fuels, without requiring any labour to operate, and working 24 hours a day every day of the year without breaking down. Sound too good to be true? Well, chances are you already have this machine - the humble dung beetle is already hard at work on many farms in our region!



Top: John inspects some dung beetles at the Ladysmith field day

Bottom: The dung beetles quickly begin burrowing into some cow dung on Pete Lawson's property at Kyeamba

Says John, “We’re bringing fertilizer into the country, and yet every single day cows are dropping dung on the ground that contains nutrients that are already on the farm, and already spread around the paddock. The trouble is that it sits on top of the ground where it allows bushflies to breed and internal parasites to complete their life cycle. The dung pollutes the paddocks and then gets washed into creeks and rivers where we least need it. Dung beetles can quickly and efficiently bury the dung, and distribute it through the top 300 mm of soil. In doing so, they’re spreading the valuable nutrients and storing carbon in the soil.”

In order to maximise the benefits of dung beetles, you need to make sure you have enough beetles on your farm, that you have the right species, and that the drenches you are using are not stopping them from doing their job.

Further information

John offers a free dung beetle identification service for landholders, and can also sell beetles suitable for your property. For more information, check out John’s helpful website at www.dungbeetleexpert.com.au, or contact John on (02) 62 480 376.



Above left: John digs into some dung looking for dung beetles, at Cheryl Baldry’s property on the Illabo field day

Above right: A dung beetle brooding ball, found in dung on Cheryl Baldry’s property on the Illabo field day

Left: John Feehan (at left) and Lawrie Sykes release some dung beetles on Lawrie’s property at the Humula field day