

Discovering soil health opportunities and limitations - calling in the experts

Independent expertise tailored to the needs of farming communities in the Farming for Sustainable Soils Project

“It was so much better to have the independent soil scientist [through the FSS Project] identifying structural and chemical issues, and telling you the steps to take to improve the actual soil structure - not just chucking more fertiliser at it and hoping for the best.” (participating farmer)



Christian Bannan with the Pyramid Hill FSS Group

“The [North Central Catchment Management Authority] has brought the consultants to the farmers, they have raised awareness of the issues with landowners and many of them have acted on that straight away.” (soils scientist)

Andrew Jones has a mixed farming enterprise, with sheep, cattle, pigs and cropping. He’s a participant in the Farming for Sustainable Soils (FSS) Project and understands the importance of expert advice on his farming practices:

“How we farm now is totally different to even five years ago - and twenty years ago is a lifetime ago. You have to keep up with the latest information or you’re going backwards.”

James Allen, also a farmer, agrees: “There’s not good awareness about how best to manage soil and how to get good outcomes. The more information you get, the better, with regard to soil health.”

Recognising this need, the FSS Project provided localised, up-to-date and scientifically based knowledge to farmers to help regenerate soil health in north central Victoria. Christian Bannan, San Jolly and Doris Bleasing are three of the wide range of natural resource management experts engaged in the FSS Project. Throughout the region, they have worked with FSS Community Facilitators and North Central CMA staff to help farmers understand both the limitations and opportunities that their soils present.



National
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Catchment Management Authority

Connecting Rivers, Landscapes, People

The Farming for Sustainable Soils Project is funded by the Australian Government’s National Landcare Program and delivered by the North Central Catchment Management Authority in collaboration with local farming communities.

Tailored advice

San Jolly is a farmer from South Australia, and she's been doing independent nutritional and livestock management consulting for two decades. In delivering workshops through the FSS Project, San ensures that she develops "custom-designed workshops to meet the requirements of individual groups". This gives farmers the best chance of applying new knowledge directly to their own farming operations.

"Every workshop that I run is individually tailored based on the advice that's given to me by the Community Facilitator and farmers about what the current issues are."

Through her farming career and running her own consultancy, San understands the value that farmers place in independent advice:

"One of the main advantages of delivering these workshops is that instead of farmers receiving information that some organisation might deem appropriate for them, they can identify what information they want to receive [and] information is tailored for them."



San Jolly delivering a workshop with Wycheproof/ Glenloth East FSS Group members

Doris Bleasing is a consultant with a background in soil management and soil science, and experience in agricultural extension and practice change. Throughout the Project, she's worked with farmers on the ground across all stages of the process - including soil testing and assessments, capacity building and knowledge sharing, and field trials and demonstrations. Christian Bannan is also a soil scientist and has worked with between 200 and 300 farmers through the FSS Project since 2010:

"My work has been in all aspects of soils - a lot of physical soil analysis, getting out in paddocks, understanding

soil variability, understanding what the problems are and what the solutions might be - things like soil amelioration and improving soil structure and organic matter. It's about putting it all in practice, helping farmers to make the right decisions."

The work that Doris, Christian and other soils experts undertake with landholders helps them to understand why they should care about soil health and how soil management can improve agricultural productivity - and farmers agree:

"Most farmers will know that parts of their paddocks are rubbish, but they don't know why, which means that that part of the soil doesn't get much love. That's why you need to get the soil scientist out there. They can help find out why that part of the paddock isn't productive and figure out how to change it." (James Allen, participating farmer)

Doris reflects on the benefits for her own practice in working directly with farmers through the FSS Project:

"I always learn something from farmers [...] to get my hands and feet dirty is really important to keep me grounded in what I do."

For landholders, the way forward is clear, as farmer James Allen says:

"What I want to do in future is to be able to find out the soil types, to understand the limitations and opportunities of the [varying soil types on my property]. There are some easy fixes with soil, but you need to know what the problems are first."



Doris Bleasing delivering a demonstration with the Pyramid Hill FSS Group