



Managing wet soils: what are your best options?

David Hopkins, Colac

The aim of this note is to help point you to the most appropriate information for your particular circumstances. Use flow chart to rank your farm and then seek appropriate information.

One of the major problems many dairy farmers face during winter and early spring is the waterlogging of soils for considerable periods. This not only causes poorer pastures, both in growth and quality, but makes it harder and more unpleasant to farm.

Those jobs with critical timing (such as silage making and crop sowing) can be upset, tractors leave deep furrows in paddocks when feeding out, and cows pugging pasture to the point where they require a full renovation, adding to costs and despair for many farmers.

Survey results

A recent survey of dairyfarmers in southern Victoria showed that waterlogging was a significant problem on many farms.

The survey found that dairy farmers are actively managing waterlogging and spend a lot of time thinking about different solutions to the problems caused by it.

Unfortunately there is no single solution that will meet the needs of all farmers because the circumstances on every farm are different. This means that different circumstances require different solutions, and that extension activities and information must be tailored accordingly.

Despite the many differences in farming situations, the survey work enabled the types of waterlogging to be grouped and ranked. Six different groups were identified.

Groups 1 and 2 (sub surface drainage needed)

(24% of farmers with waterlogging)

For these farmers waterlogging starts in winter and lasts well into spring. Waterlogging causes severe production losses in winter and spring as it means that paddocks are often wet for weeks or months at a time and farmers miss out on important spring pasture production. Often more than half of the farm gets waterlogged. These farmers are likely to experience problems in spreading fertiliser, making silage and cutting hay.

These farmers experience substantial economic and lifestyle loss from waterlogging and spend a considerable

amount of time trying to manage the effects of waterlogging.

Groups 4 & 5 (Grazing management needed)

(26% of farmers with waterlogging)

For these farmers waterlogging generally only happens in winter. Although they may experience severe problems in winter these farmers can generally utilise pastures during the spring growth period. Usually less than half of the farm gets waterlogged and then usually for only a few days or a couple of weeks at a time. Waterlogging is much less likely to prevent or delay hay and silage making on these farms.

Group 3 (intermediate drainage/grazing needed)

(16% of farmers with waterlogging)

Farmers in this group experience severe waterlogging in winter and spring similar to farmers in groups 1 and 2. However, unlike those farmers, the farmers in group three can graze waterlogged pastures for a few hours a day, which gives them some flexibility in their management options. Although the installation of sub-surface and surface drains may be justified for many farmers in this group, alternatives such as on-off grazing could be just as effective. Which of these alternatives is the better will depend on individual circumstances.

Consequently, many farmers in this group may find they have more in common with groups 4 & 5 rather than groups 1 & 2.

Group 6 (simple grazing strategies appropriate)

(33% of farmers with waterlogging)

Farmers in this group experience occasional problems with waterlogging in very wet years. Simple grazing strategies and information on the less expensive stand-off areas are most likely to be of benefit to these farmers.

Having decided which group suits you best, use the following chart (Appendix 1) to work out what sort of information you want.

Further information

Contact the dairy extension team at DPI Colac, Ellinbank or Warrnambool

What's best for my farm and me?

