

Dr Mick Battam – AgEnviro Solutions

In 2015 Dr Mick Battam successfully applied for the Waste Less Recycle More grant on a project that has seen him advising on 408 sporting fields around NSW. Working closely with local Football associations, Dr Battam and his experienced team's key objectives were to provide advice on how to amend fields so they can handle sport wear and tear. The results varied all over the state, some fields were in reasonable condition while others were barely playable.

Following the assessments and soil analysis, the next point of action was to put a proposal together for the Local Councils on the best way to fix the unique problems facing each sports ground. Some councils were responsive, while other were apprehensive due to lack of budget or resistance to change. The results found that most fields were low in organic matter and suffering many different types of problems.

Dr Battam said the parameters of the Waste Less Recycle More Grant allowed him to open many doors that may have stayed shut or taken much longer to open within the Council sports ground management industry. One that had mostly relied on a sand based mix and repatching solutions for worn grounds. "The grant helped create momentum with the projects, getting councils on board and affording the time needed to get more accurate data and results for everyone".

There are still so many myths out there, the soil scientist continued, that make it hard to change people's perspective on recycled organics. "The resistance is coming from the lack of knowledge on the benefits and wide scaled capabilities of recycled organics. Historically so many sports ground managers have stuck to a more traditional school of thought that used high percentage sand mixed with low to no organic matter to fix their grounds. Alternatively, councils were patching grounds with turf which, over time is a very expensive management strategy and often, was ineffective in fixing the pre-existing problems" Dr Battam said.

During this project, the AgEnviro team found that many soil mixes or types of grass were being blamed for the issues they were experiencing on their grounds. However, there were often other issues at play, such as poor irrigation or simply poor soil. Which were being wrongly diagnosed due to the lack of testing, according to AgEnviro.

One successful example within this project was working with the Sutherland Shire Council. Their field in Gynea has close to the "highest usage of any council field in the Southern Hemisphere, with the equivalent of two adult teams playing an average of 52 hours of football per week". AgEnviro refined their rehabilitation schedule back in 2012. They reconstructed the field using the existing profile with a 35mm spread of organics rotary hoed across the two fields. They then lay Couch turf and applied a regulated management strategy with great success. Previously, "40% of the field was being patched every year". Since 2012 and the rehabilitation of the Gynea grounds, there has been no patch work needed. Although, Dr Battam admits some areas are quite thin. Across Sutherland Shires 127 Fields, AgEnviro's reports found 52 fields were in atrocious condition in 2012. With the

Council spending, somewhere between \$300 to \$600 thousand per year to reconstruct or repatch the fields.

Now, AgEnviro is reporting that only nine fields in Sutherland Shire that are now considered to be in bad condition. And where the Sutherland Shire Council used to patch around 3.5 hectares across their 127 fields, it was reported in 2016 that has now reduced to 0.4 hectares, while their expenses are also expected to have reduced as well.

When discussing recycled organics, Dr Battam and his team have the data to prove it works. It is a cost effective alternative and with the right testing and pre-emptive analysis recycled organics is appropriate for many different industries. "Tradition is the hardest thing to break in most industries. Many growers, managers and leaders have been doing the same thing for so many years, I don't think they even know why they're doing it. And in some cases, the results would indicate that some turf farmers don't even know what they're doing with regards to fertilisers, with huge variances in application rates between two farmers, one with 200kg the other with 1200kg, on similar fields for similar soils".

Dr Battam indicated that people can easily be misled by misinformation if they do not have a fair and independent evaluation of the soil and what it needs. Not only with sports grounds but across all industries, Dr Battam said, while there is plenty of work continuing with sports ground management "I have seen huge opportunities to work within the agricultural industry and the turf industry". The recent results from the AgEnviro project, supported through the Waste Less Recycle More grant has shown real results and gives strength to the argument for more support for longer trials and greater diversity in recycled organics application.