

Efficient plant nutrition vital

THE newly formed Agronomy Community has met for the first time to share the latest in the science of plant nutrition.

Environmental issues were the focus for much of the day for the plant nutrition agronomists, with issues such as soil carbon management and the implications of a price on carbon for farmers.

Charlie Walker, Incitec Pivot Fertilisers' technical and development manager, hosted more than 50 members of the Agronomy Community at their inaugural conference last month in Brisbane.

"Broadly speaking, speakers focused on ways to improve the efficiency of fertiliser use for better performing crops and pastures, while reducing losses to the environment," Mr Walker said.

"With 227 members and growing, the Agronomy Community has been created by Incitec Pivot Fertilisers to advance the science of plant nutrition among researchers and agronomists to help Australian farmers."

Keynote speaker Dr Rob Mikkelsen, regional director of the International Plant Nutrition Institute (IPNI) for western North America, based in California, said agronomists must continue to take a leading role in the management of plant nutrition to ensure sustainable food and fibre production into the future.

Dr Mikkelsen said that while crop yields could fall by 40 to 60 percent without the use of commercial fertilisers, there was a widespread lack of understanding in the community about the role fertilisers played in supporting the world's growing need for food and fibre.

On the other hand, he said the over-use and misuse of fertilisers was known to be detrimental to the environment.

He said regulations were being developed in California to meet the state's commitment to the Kyoto protocol, as well as minimise nitrate levels in water systems.

"In California, the government has committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020," he said.

"One of their targets is to reduce nitrous oxide emissions from agriculture by 5pc, because an estimated 60pc of nitrous oxide emissions come from denitrification losses in crops such as cotton, almonds and wheat."

He said how emissions would be regulated was not yet clear.



Professor Richard Eckard, director of the Primary Industries Climate Challenges Centre, giving an update on Australia's Carbon Farming Initiative.



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BELOW: Attending the inaugural Agronomy Community conference are Sam Gulliford, McGregor Gourlay, Sharon O'Keeffe, Landmark Toowoomba, Zoe McInnes, Landmark Pittsworth, and Shane Fitz Gerald, Total Grower Services.

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Roy Hildebrand, Incitec Pivot Fertilisers, Dr Doris Blaesing, RM Consulting Group, Dr Graham Kingston, BSES, and Pippie Lee, Purkiss Rural, Armidale, NSW, at the Agronomy Community conference.

the Primary Industries Climate Challenges Centre, gave the Agronomy Community an update on Australia's Carbon Farming Initiative.

Dr Eckard said the voluntary initiative now being developed would be internationally benchmarked and recognise carbon sinks (where carbon could be stored for at least 100 years) and sources (where methane and nitrous oxide emissions to the atmosphere can be stopped or reduced).

He said the National Carbon Offset Standard was being used to assess a range of potential carbon credits in



agriculture. "The key gases in agriculture are methane, with 25 times the global warming potential of carbon dioxide and a lifespan of eight to 12 years, and nitrous oxide with 298 times the global warming potential of carbon dioxide and a lifespan of well over 100 years," he said.

He said denitrification was the main process driving nitrous oxide release and could come from any source of nitrogen in the soil, including fertiliser or organic sources.

Dr Doris Blaesing, senior consultant from RMCG, also addressed the issue of soil carbon.

"It is important to remind farmers that whatever their opinion of climate

change, there are likely to be policy changes aimed at reducing carbon emissions and encouraging carbon sequestration, as well as changes in consumer preferences," she said.

Dr Blaesing said agronomists could help farmers better understand soil carbon, with many farmers needing reassurance that their carbon levels were adequate for their soil type.

"Organic carbon has always had a great value for crop productivity, through improving water and nutrition holding capacity and overall soil and crop health," she said.

"To protect soil carbon, the more permanent vegetation the better and the less disturbance of the soil the better."

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CBRE
CB RICHARD ELLIS

Brendan Robins 0402 159 588 / 5457 5757
brendan.robins@cbre.com.au

Peter Rossi 0407 179 389 / 07 3833 9887
peter.rossi@cbre.com.au

WIDE BAY
REAL ESTATE

Grae Shelton 0418 726 696 / 07 4153 1011
graeshelton@widebay.com.au

*approx. 18 Smith Street, Mooloolaba
cbre.com.au

