

### Agronomists' Induction: Session 7

Judith Stafford



### East Midlands



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Vale of Belvoir James & Michael Parker



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### Agronomists' Induction: Session 7

Soil health

Amanda Bennett, Resource Management Scientist (Soils), AHDB

Livestock in the arable rotation

Lizzie Sagoo, Principle soil scientist, ADAS

## GREATSOILS



## Soil health

Dr Amanda Bennett, AHDB amanda.bennett@ahdb.org.uk





### Principles of soil management: Soil health

 "In a healthy soil, the interactions between chemistry (pH, nutrients and contaminants), physics (soil structure and water balance) and biology (including earthworms, microbes and plant roots) are optimised for the conditions in that place"







## All soils are different





### Physical

- Texture
- Structure
- Drainage

### Chemical

- pH
- N, P, K, Mg
- Minor nutrients

### **Biological**

- Earthworms
- Soil food web
- Microbiology

### Physical

✓ Know soil textures to understand limits to workability and trafficability

- ✓ Improve soil structure to provide an effective continuous pore space
- ✓ Optimise water balance, through drainage if necessary







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### Chemical

✓ Maintain an optimum pH

 $\checkmark$  Provide plant nutrients in the right amounts in the right place at the right time

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Soil pH – how to measure and manage it based on an understanding of soil texture Audrey Litterick, Earthcare Tech



Action points for farmers and growers Know the texture and type of soils on your holding Test your soil pH regularly (at least once every four years and ideally once every two years if you are a high value crop grower on a light soil) and interpret the results correctly for your own soil

 Choose an appropriate sampling strategy for your own farm and be prepared to spend money on more samples where you find evidence that soil pH could be impacting on crop yield or where you suspect big differences in soil pH within fields

Be aware that some organic materials applied to mprove soil health (e.g. composts, digestates and some types of paper crumble) have a liming (or neutralising) value. It is easy to test these materials for their liming value so that you can determine the likely effect of using them at different application rates on soil pH

Be aware of the differences between different types of liming agents and their relative advantages and disadvantages. As well as bearing in mind price, choose those appropriate for your own soils

#### Background

Maintaining optimum soil pH values in all parts of the field is essential in order to maintain soil quality and health, crop quality and yield. This guidance document explains why soil pH is important and outlines the impact of soil type and xture on pH. It describes how and when to test soils for pH, how to calculate the amount of lime or other neutralising materials required, which liming product(s) to use and how and when to apply them.

Soil pH is a measure of the relative acidity or alkalinity of a coil. While the scale goes from 0 to 14 (with a neutral pH represented by 7.0) most agricultural soils have pH values of

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between 5.5 and 7.5. The pH scale is logarithmic: that is a pH of 5 is ten times more acidic than a pH of 6. The natural pH of a soil is determined by its chemical composition, but most agricultural soils with natural pH values of less than 7 will gradually acidify over time and regular applications of lime will be needed to maintain soil pH at target (Figure 1).

Soil pH has a profound effect on nutrient availability to crops, with most essential plant nutrients being most available to most crop plant species within the pH range of 6.0 to 6.5. Crop quality and yield can be severely affected where soil pH is not maintained close to target for the soil and crops in question and total crop failure is possible in vegetable crops where trace element deficiency has resulted from inappropriate soil pH. Soil pH also affects uptake of potentially toxic elements (PTEs), with PTEs such as cadmium made more available for crop uptake at lower pH values. Soil pH also affects the numbers, diversity and functions of beneficial and pathogenic micro-organisms as well as the larger organisms including both soil-dwelling pest species and beneficial macrofauna species. For example, the soil-borne pathogen Plasmodiophora brassicae, which causes clubroot in vegetable brassicas and oilseed rape, prefers more acidic soils, and liming to raise the soil pH is a management option for clubroot control. Earthworms are most abundant and active in soils with pH values between 5,5 and 7 and most species cannot function well in solls with



by the Professional Agricultural Analysis Group in 2015/16 found that soil pH was less than 6.0 in 17% of arable soils tested and less than 5.5 in 19% of grassland soils tested



Figure 1. Aerial image of the Woodlands long-term experiment at Craibstone. Crop rotation: Three-year grass/clover ley (Grass Year 1-3), s, spring barley, swede, spring oats unde

Here, the effects of pH levels ranging between 4.5 and

eight-course rotation comprising 3-year grass/clover ley,

winter wheat, potatoes, spring barley, swede and spring

rotation is present every year, enabling a comparison of the response of all crop types within the same season

(Figure 1), Measurements of topsoil chemical, physical

potatoes and spring oats) at four pH levels (4.5, 6.0, 6.5

The scorecard brings together information about soil

integrated report uses traffic light coding to identify those

properties requiring further investigation to determine the

management steps needed to minimise potential risks to

chemical, physical and biological properties. The

from four crops (second-year ley, following wi

gical properties were taken in October 2018

oats (undersown with grass/clover). Each crop in the

7.5 (in 0.5 increments) on soil properties and crop performance are being tested. The trial involves an

#### Background

Food and fibre crops need suitable soils that are maintained to provide optimal soil structure, water rete and nutrient availability. The physical, chemical and biological properties of soil interact to deliver these functions. Measuring soil health, therefore, requires an integrated approach, combining the assessment of these three factors. The chemical and physical constraints of soil on crop and grassland productivity are well understood, but the role of soil biology is less clear. A key aim of the Soil Biology and Soil Health Partnership is to improve our understanding of soil biology and to explore the ways in which farmers can measure and manage soil health. The Partnership has developed a soil health scorecard, which aims to provide information on key indicators of soil chemical, physical and biological condition, to help guide soil and crop management decisions. This is now being tested at long-term experimental sites (LTEs), where the key drivers of soil biology - food source, physical and nical environment - are being explored

#### Long-term experiments at SRUC Craibstone

crop productivity. Here, we report initial testing of the scorecard for those soil properties that already have an established evaluation framework (e.g. soil nutrients, visual evaluation of soil structure score [VESS]). Research Soil pH is a key component of soil health because it affects soil chemical (e.g. availability of nutrients), biological (e.g. microbial activity) and physical properties (e.g. aggregation continues to develop interpretation frameworks for more soil properties, including biological indicators of clay minerals). The long-term pH trial in Woodlands Field at SRUC Craibstone near Aberdeen was set up in 1961. (e.g. microbial biomass/respiration, nematodes

and 7.5).

Soil health scorecard



BBRÖ FACTS

Section 2 Organic materials

#### **Biological**

Feed the soil (organisms) regularly with organic matter

zinc (Zn)).

- Move soil only when you have to
- ✓ Diversify crops in space and time



#### AHDB AHDB BBRO AHDB GREATSOILS GREATSOILS Measuring and managing soil Livestock and the How to count earthworms organic matter arable rotation What do earthworms tell us? Earthworms improve plant productivity, are principally A good presence of earthworms across a field responsible for engineering the soll environment and are an important food source for native birds such as the song means the benefits are likely to be widespread thruth. There are up to 10 common earthworm species in High numbers of earthworms indicate the potential for significant benefits to plant agricultural polls and these can be prouped into three ecological types: epigeic, endogeic and anecic earthworms - each group having a unique and important function. Earthworms are an indicator of soil health, being imported productivity The presence of each ecological group indicates the potential for specific earthworn benefits, such as carbon cycling, nutrient mobilitation and/or water infitration by pH, waterlogging, compaction, tillage, rotation and omanic matter management How to identify earthworms Epipeic (litter-dwelling earthworms) Dark red-headed worms · Small (-Bcm) in size, typically about the length of a matchatick · Often fast-moving (most likely to escape from the worm pol!) Sansitive to: Tilage idetrimental and otheric matter and cleving and in an arrive rotation with organi nagement such as manure applications (beneficial) Boles: Carbon cycling and new for onlive birth. What is soil organic matter? To help understand how organic matter cycles in the soil Soil organic matter is the term used for all living, or once-living, materials within, or added to, the soil. This and how it affects soil processes, we usually consider organic matter as three main pools: Endogeic (toppoli eartheorms) includes roots developing during the growing season, · Fresh plant residues (litter, decaying roots) and small · Pale-coloured and green worms (not red) incorporated crop stubble or added manures and slurries living soil organisms · Small to medium size All organic matter contains carbon (C), but it also contains nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), sulphur (S), potassium (K), magnesium (Mg), calcium (Ca) and a · Decomposing (active) organic matter · Often curl up when handled, and green worms may emit a vellow fit Stable organic matter, often linked tightly to the clay . The most common earthworm group found in arable fields. whole range of micronutrients (e.g. copper, (Cu) and minerals isometimes called humusl Sensitive to: Organic matter management (peneticial) Some soils also contain very stable materials that were Roles: Soil aggregation and nutrient mobilisation for plant Soil organic matter is found in all sorts of forms with a originally organic matter, such as charcoal and coal range of ages. If we look very carefully at the C atoms, we find some that were fixed from carbon dioxide by What does soil organic matter do? photosynthesis last week and some that date back over 10,000 years. The intermingling of organic matter with Dark red-or black-headed worms Organic matter adds to soil fertility and overall soil health by enhancing the physical, chemical and biological properties of soil (Figure 2): · Large size 5-8cmi, typically similar size to a penci minerals from the underlying parent material (geology) is · Make deep vertical tunnels, up to 2m a key process in soil formation Often found below surface earthworm cas or midden residue piles Eresh plant residues fuel biological life in soil. The amount of active decomposing organic matter Feed at night, foraging the soil surface around their burrow for littler in soil has a large impact on biological properties, nutrient cycling and soil structure Commonly found in grassland but often absent from ploughed fields and where there is no surface littler Stable organic matter changes the colour of soil and adds significantly to the active surface area, thereby Suggitive to: Tillion idelrighted and organic malter many changing the physical and chemical properties and such as manure applications and straw return (beneficial) ses in soil. This is very important in sandy and Roles: Deep burrows that improve seration, water infiltration light silty soils and shot development



Background

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A dim to increase your Soil Organic Matter (SOM) levels, as this can have multiple benefits for soil health. Adding compost to your soil is an effective way of increasing SOM. In trials, composit increased SOM in half the time of farmyard manure

Compost is good news for soil health

Check guidelines before using compost. Most UK farm assurance schemes now permit the use of quality PAS 100 composts\*, as do most produce buyers, but some have rules governing their use

Determine if adding compost to your soil is cost-effective by comparing the costs of buying, hauling and spreading compost with the financial value of the nutrients compost supplies and the yield banefit

Bear in mind that soil quality and yield benefits can take several years of continued compost use to develop the holding's postcode at the UK Compost Certification movember and ecomposition address of the

Sol Organic Matter (SOM) is the organic component of soil, consisting of three main parts · Fresh plant residues and small king soll organisms · Decomposing lactive) organic matter and · Stable organic mellior (human)

Organic matter is important for soil fartility and crop productivity, building and maintaining it is a vital component of sustainable soil management. The amount of organic matter in solls depends on soil texture, climate, the input and composition of organic materials, decomposition, and the type of larming boycame makey Soils used for anable and vegetable production typically contain

1-3% organic matter (generally higher in Scottich solid). In panaral, for any one cropping system, the natural level of SOM in a day soit will be higher than in a sandy soil, and gressland soils. usually contain more relative to a continuous arable rotation. Therefore, whilst it is generally good to increase your SOM content, vegetable growers on a sandy soil should not expect to achieve and maintain the same SCM content as pasture-fed Evestock-producing neighbours on a heavier soll.

Many solis are suffering from a lack of organic matter. Farmers and growers often want to maintain or enhance SOM content as this can have a range of benefits for soil health. However, recent work has shown that, where improved soil quality is concerned. not al forms of organic matter are equil. Given that applying bulky organic matter has a financial cost, it is important to understand the monts of different organic materials.



Principles of soil health

> Soil is an essential natural resource
> Soil classification (type)
> Soil structure
> Soil organic matter
> Water and soils
> Principles to improve soil health
> Useful links

Although soil type cannot be easily changed, knowing which soil type is present helps determine how to manage the soil to optimise its structure, water relations, and nutrient supply.

#### Soil is an essential natural resource

Healthy, fertile soil is a dynamic living system with physical, chemical and biological properties that promote plant and animal health and maintain environmental quality.

#### Soil classification (type)

Soils are formed over thousands of years and reflect geology, past climate, vegetation, landscape, human activity, and management.

**Find out more about the inherent properties of different soil types** 



Back to: GREATsoils



#### Knowledge library

Missed an online event or webinar? Browse our video archive





### Soil organisms stabilise soil structure

Soil organisms help bind soil into stable aggregates.

### The function of soil biology

Soil biology drives soil functions – find out more.

#### Soil microorganisms – fungi and bacteria

Soil microorganisms play a central role in driving soil processes.

#### Soil management for horticulture

This soil management guide is a practical manual for growers and secondmists with the original formers.



#### Soil macrofauna – earthworms

Earthworms incorporate organic material into the soil and provide



Managing Soil Organic

Soil organic matter is the term used

Measuring and

Matter



Research Case Study:

Testing the effect of

additions on soil health

organic material



### The soil food web and nutrient cycling

Soils contain a very high diversity of organisms. These soil organisms



# Measuring and monitoring indicators of soil health





### Overview

- Approaches to improve soil health:
  - Increasing organic matter inputs
  - Increasing crop rotation (length and diversity)
  - Reducing tillage intensity, where possible
- A soil health review can be used to:
  - highlight areas for investigation
  - measure and monitor improvements over time
  - start conversations about management approaches







### Soil Biology and Soil Health Partnership



#### Soil health scorecards at Harper Adams University Long-term experiment: Comparison over time on same replicated plots



#### October 2017 – 2 year Grass/clover ley

Attribute	Control	FYM (23 yrs)	Green compost (13 yrs)
SOM (%LOI)	3.0	4.1	4.0
рН	6.4	7.0	7.0
Ext. P (mg/l)	56	73	60
Ext. K (mg/l)	80	311	187
Ext. Mg (mg/l)	44	87	63
VESS score	2	2	1
Earthworms (No./pit)	11	13	11
PMN (mg/kg)	23	90	43
CO <sub>2</sub> -C (mg/kg)	198	228	222

#### October 2020 – cereal stubbles

Attribute	Control	FYM (25 yrs)	Green compost (15 yrs)
SOM (%LOI)	2.7	3.2	3.4
рН	6.3	6.7	6.7
Ext. P (mg/l)	73	82	72
Ext. K (mg/l)	82	212	144
Ext. Mg (mg/l)	33	69	50
VESS score	3	3	3
Earthworms (No./pit)	1	1	1
PMN (mg/kg)	24	37	37
CO <sub>2</sub> -C (mg/kg)	87	111	109



#### Investigate

Review

Continue rotational monitoring

SOM: soil organic matter (loss on ignition); VESS Visual evaluation of soil structure; PMN: potentially mineralisable nitrogen

## GREATSOILS



Unearth a wealth of resources on soil management at: <u>www.ahdb.org.uk/greatsoils</u>

Visit the AHDB knowledge library for further information and access to research reports

www.ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library

Find out about the Soil Biology and Soil Health Partnership at www.ahdb.org.uk/soil-biology-and-soil-health-partnership



### Livestock in the arable rotation

Integrating beef production into arable systems

Lizzie Sagoo, ADAS Soil Scientist



- Diversification
- Improved soil quality
- Weed management
- Profit







AHDE



### Integrating livestock into arable systems – benefits for the livestock producer

- Potential to start or expand production
- Reduced cost of production
- Need to link to arable farmers







# Integrating beef production into arable systems

- AHDB Beef & Lamb project (2016-2022)
- **Aim**: Investigate the practical, economic, environmental & agronomic implications of integrating beef enterprises into arable systems
- Norwood Farm, Somerset



### Norwood Farm Somerset



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Autumn 2017 – grass sown 2018 – 1<sup>st</sup> yr grazing 2019 – 2<sup>nd</sup> yr grazing 2020 – 3<sup>rd</sup> yr grazing 2021 – Arable, cereals (NOR 07)

### Norwood Farm - measurements

- Effect of grass/herbal ley on
  - Soil quality
  - Blackgrass
  - Yields of the following arable crop
- Forage quality & livestock performance
- Economics









### Impact on soil quality

- Assess soil health
  - 6 fields at Norwood Farm
  - Baseline measurements in autumn 2017
  - Repeat measurements in autumn 2020
- Quantify the impact of grass and herbal leys on soil quality
  - Change between 2017 and 2020
     measurements





### Soil organic matter

- Measured by loss on ignition
- Average increase 0.3 percentage points between 2017 and 2020 (*P*<0.05)</li>
- Equivalent to an increase of 6 t/ha organic matter in the top 15 cm layer of soil

Leys – taking land out of cultivation Grazing animals – manure inputs





### Soil biological health - earthworms

 Earthworm numbers increased by a mean of 60% in grass fields between 2017 and 2020

Field		Worms (number/m <sup>2</sup> )		
		2017	2020	
NOR07	Arable	209	154	
NOR07	Grass/clover	139	169	
NOR06	Grass/clover	95	332	
NOR06	Herbal	139	228	
NOR05	Grass/clover	222	215	
NOR05	Herbal	197	323	







### What is the benefit to the following arable crop?

- NOR 07 field was split grass/clover and arable in autumn 2017
- Impact on blackgrass and 2021 barley crop

2017	Winter wheat		
2018	Grass/clover Winter oilseed rape		
2019	Grass/clover Winter triticale		
2020	Grass/clover Wild bird mix		
2021	Spring barley		





### Using leys to manage weeds in the rotation

- Why do we need to manage weeds?
  - Herbicide resistance
  - Loss of actives
  - Yield loss
- Breaking the weed seed cycle
  - Seed return
  - Seed back



# What is the benefit to the following arable crop?

#### Blackgrass

2017	Winter	wheat	
2017	57.5 heads/m <sup>2</sup>	52.5 heads/m <sup>2</sup>	
2018	Grass/clover	Winter oilseed rape	
2019	Grass/clover	Winter triticale	
2020	2020 Grass/clover Wild		
2021	Spring barley 0.16 heads/m <sup>2</sup> 1.30 heads/m <sup>2</sup>		



- Impact on spring barley yields
  - Yields were 0.7 t/ha higher following grass/clover



# Do the economics stack up?

Full cost benefit analysis of cattle in the rotation at Norwood

# List of costs considered in the setting up of the HDB ley and rearing the cattle

Set-up costs	Cattle production costs	
Establishment of the ley	Variable costs	
Tillage (e.g. discing, drilling, rolling)	Additional forage or supplementary concentrates	
Inputs (e.g. seeds, sprays, fertiliser)	Fertilisers or sprays	a la
Infrastructure costs	Vet and medicines charges	
Fencing posts	Overheads	
Fencing wire	Labour	- MILLING -
Electric fencing equipment	Machinery/vehicles	
Water troughs and pipes	Electricity	
Handling system	Water	
Labour		



### Set-up costs at Norwood Farm

Ley establishment	Grass/clover ley £/ha	Grass/herbal ley £/ha		
Subsoiling, power harrowing + drilling and rolling	113	113	All associated costs included – e.g. fuel, labour and depreciation	
Seeds	178	205	Price at time	
Total	291	318		

Infrastructure	Grass/clover ley £/ha	Grass/herbal ley £/ha		
Fencing, gates water troughs, pipes, cattle crush	603	603	Materials only	
Labour	417	417	All infrastructure labour	
Total	1,020	1,020		
Total set-up cost	165	174	£/year of ley (inc. depre	ciation of materials)



### Cattle rearing/production costs at Norwood

Variable costs	Grass/clover ley £/ha	Grass/herbal ley £/ha	
Supplementary feed, fertiliser and sprays	171	145	Only the grass/clover group received some additional silage
Vet and med	16.6	16.6	3 insecticide treatments
Total	187.6	161.6	
Overheads	Grass/clover ley £/ha	Grass/herbal ley £/ha	
Labour - cattle	150	150	Cattle management
Fertiliser spreading	15	15	Cost of the machinery and labour
Electricity, fuel and water	46	46	Mains water
Total	211	211	
Total rearing costs	93	87	£/head



### Estimated margin for Norwood Farm

	Grass/clover ley	Grass/herbal ley
Cattle output - Valuation change	<i>Output per head £184*</i> Output per ha £791/ha	<i>Output per head £191*</i> Output per ha £821/ha
Set-up costs - Ley and infrastructure costs	£165/ha	£174/ha
Rearing costs - Cattle production	£399/ha	£373/ha
Margin - Before rent and finance	£227/ha	£274/ha

\* Weight gained x £1.80 per kg

### Margin comparisons Net margin before rent and finance

### **Grazing leys**

- Grass/clover ley
  - ►£227/ha
- Grass/herbal ley

£274/ha



#### Crops

	Winter wheat	£567/ha
	Winter barley	£222/ha
	Spring oats	£198/ha
	Spring barley	£180/ha
L. KV	Winter oilseed rape	£101/ha
	Winter beans	£27/ha
	Spring linseed	£-293/ha

Source: AHDB Farmbench, South West farms on clay loam and silty clay loam soils - 3 year average 2018 -2020

- Before rent and finance



### Take home messages

- Grass and herbal leys & grazing livestock in the rotation
  - Soil quality benefits
  - Help control blackgrass
  - Diversified rotation
  - Impact on farm profitability
  - AHDB 'Mix and match' cost benefit calculator

ahdb.org.uk/beef-in-the-arable-rotation-mix-and-match-calculator







## Thank you

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### Day 2 Workshop – 12:25

# Red Group – Seminar 2

# **Green Group – Emperor Suite**

# Blue Group – Seminar 1