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Hortus Technical Services Launches Reef Smart Program



Just five months after Hortus Technical Services (HTS) expanded its capability as an independent agronomic services company through its acquisition of Crop Tech from John Deere Water, Hortus has been busy developing its expansion program – launching a new suite of soil, sap and water testing services that offers cattle, cane, cotton, fruit and vegetable producers choice. In addition they have consolidated their position in the Australian market and added significantly to the national team, based out of Bundaberg.

The announcement this week that Hortus Technical Services has launched an integrated agronomic management service with compliant soil testing services, was well received by cane growers and cattle producers up, down and in from the coast. Hortus Senior Agronomist, Andrew Bauer and Laboratory Manager Dr. Angela Hanke have worked closely with Government and Industry to ensure the new program being launched met the Australian industry's rigorous best management practice guidelines, and the Queensland Government's regulatory requirements, especially with the recent introduction of *The Great Barrier Reef Protection Amendment Bill 2009* on 1 January 2010. Hortus has specifically designed the S10 and S11 tests to meet specifications required by the current proficiency testing program underway.

Crop inputs, including fertiliser which can account for up to a quarter of growers' yearly spend, are expensive and soil testing is the first of many steps to determine appropriate nutrients to maximise crop quality and yield. Hortus is confident that as an independent, Queensland based, certified laboratory with 20 years of local experience based on growers historical data, it gives growers an informed choice of what is needed and allows them to decide what fertiliser to buy.

Hortus is leading the way in field information collection whereby all sample information can be entered online and stored against the growers' online account together with their soil test results, once processed for later reference.

Hortus has also been leading the way in integrated agronomic management across all horticultural crops including irrigation management, IPM and crop nutrition -soil testing is one tool they use as part of an integrated agronomic management program also consisting of continuous nutrient monitoring through the use of its QuickSoil test. This is a liquid extraction of readily available nutrients in solution – the ones most likely to be leached to the reef. By using the QuickSoil in conjunction with the S10 or S11 tests which show total elemental composition, growers are able to actively monitor the best time to fertilise based on peak demand for particular nutrients at particular phenological intervals ensuring they apply only the optimal amount of nutrient at the right time, in the right form for the crop to utilise.



As part of the Reef Smart Program, Hortus is also offering a unique mapping service to determine areas of high risk for leaching. The GPS co-ordinates of these sites will be stored against soil samples taken so that they can continue to be monitored with QuickSoils, and used in the environmental risk management plans that Hortus will be preparing on behalf of the growers.

The final piece of the puzzle is in the water runoff tests conducted through the use of Auto-samplers on each river catchment that delivers water to the reef. Sample collection is triggered by height fluctuations in each river catchment. These test results can then be applied as an industry-wide picture linked back to the original batched soil tests to determine the percentage of total soil nutrients that end up as actual runoff into the reef as anthropogenic load at the saline interface. This process only applies to whole river catchments and is not linked to specific farms, and simply enables participants to track over time the increase in nutrient use efficiency of the entire catchment.

Growers can opt to have paddock scale monitoring conducted by submitting water tests to be tied to a particular block to monitor their own nutrient management.

Last month, Kerran Nicolle joined Hortus as a Sales and Business Development Agronomist. Kerran will be responsible for developing Hortus's business for the sugarcane industry and will facilitate the company's plans to roll out a local agronomic capability through the release of it's world leading Agpro software to distributors and consultants nationally.

Hortus has confirmed that its soil sampling kits will be available from most local rural merchandise stores, as well as through it's network of independent consultants. The kits will help growers collect samples and take advantage of this comprehensive and price competitive service. The Hortus soil testing service undergoes rigorous assessment on an ongoing basis to ensure accuracy, compliance to Australian standards, and to ensure the fast turnaround that the company boasts, is maintained.

According to Hortus Technical Director, Jack Milbank, this is just the start of a comprehensive expansion in Agribusiness service provision by Hortus Technical Services.

"I do not believe growers want the company they buy fertiliser from being the same one telling them what and how much fertiliser they need to apply. We believe as an independent locally focussed laboratory, based in Queensland, we can provide a professional, independent service and, with the help of our network of certified consultants and distributors, allow the grower to choose how best to manage their individual situation." he said.

Mr Milbank said 2010 would see the relationship strengthen with its distribution partners and associated consultants across the Australian horticultural, grains and cattle industries with some exciting developments, firstly with the introduction of the integrated agronomic services platform, the appointment of permanent Queensland management, and regionally based agronomic staff, and the introduction of it's advanced software packages AgPro and ProCheck.

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