

Focus

Paddock Masters

By KIM WOODS

BROTHERS Graham and Max Maddock have become masters at making money off small areas.

They use waste from a local soy milk factory to fatten heifers for the domestic supermarket trade, and they convert bovine waste into income using vermiculture, or worm breeding.

The pair and their wives farm 129ha at Yackandandah, in Victoria's north east.

The farm had operated as a dairy for 35 years until 12 years ago when the switch was made to beef, and the acreage was reduced, prompting the family to "work smarter".

The beef herd produces steers at 350-450kg for the local market, and the vermiculture system was developed to produce worm cast for the pastures.

"We had a big mechanical mixer we used to mix the compost for the worms and thought we could use it to mix rations for cattle," Graham said.

The brothers decided the domestic supermarket trade was a market they could supply.

"Although the cattle would be lofted, we wanted

them to be free range," Graham said.

Their search led them to try soybean waste from the Vitasoy factory at Wodonga at \$160 a tonne delivered.

The bean waste is dry feed, produced as a by-product of the factory's crushing plant.

"We planned to target the off-season supply times with heifers and become price takers," Max said.

They began buying well-bred British-bred heifers from Victorian and Tasmanian store sales at 240-250kg, feeding 80-130 head at a time on 6ha.

Once the cattle reach 380-450kg liveweight, they are sold directly to a domestic supermarket.

Max said the cattle are fed a simple ration of bean waste and silage, without additives, in troughs every second or third day.

"Our costs are roughly \$100 a beast and, depending on market, we can achieve a profit of \$300-\$380 an animal," Max said.

Costs are trimmed by producing modular

above-ground silage stacks although last year the Maddocks were forced to do wrapped bales, & this added considerably to the costs.

Max said feeding the cattle on 6ha enabled paddocks to be rested regularly.

He said the application of worm castes, NutriSoil, had helped to drought proof the farm.

"We have been impressed with the results on our phalaris, cocksfoot and ryegrass pastures," Max said.

"Plant root depth has increased, the soil is more friable, and we have doubled our top-soil.

"We have not used chemical fertilisers for 12 years and our soil pH has moved from 4.2 to 5.2 in the past eight years."

The farm has heavy clay soils and is in a 875mm rainfall zone.

"Soil tests show we do not need any applications of nitrogen, calcium or magnesium."

"In Winter we can find 60-70 earthworms per shovelful of soil.

"The fine holes created by the worms allow plant roots to access nutrients," he said.

The Maddocks now make

prescription vermiculture mixes to suit different pasture and cropping systems.

Originally they were bulk spreading 600 tonnes of worm castings a year on neighbouring properties.

But over the last four to five years, the business has progressively changed to a liquid product.

Bulk vermicast was being spread locally at 250kg/ha but it was costly to freight over longer distances.

"We now use five litres of liquid concentrate per ha as a foliar application compared to 250kg of bulk vermicast," Graham said.

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Packaged liquid product has enabled the Maddocks to expand the business from broadacre applications to the house-hold garden and nursery market.

"Many farmers are looking for a natural alternative to artificial fertilisers, mainly due to rising costs," Max said.

"Growers simply can't put a bag of super out anymore and expect results.

"They have moved to prescription farming dependent on soil tests."

Max and Graham recycle the waste that gathers around the cattle self-feeders through the

vermiculture windrows. This is added to a blend of seaweed, fish meal and minerals to feed the compost worms.

Graham said the combination of vermiculture and native earthworms had resulted in pasture machinery sitting idle.

"About seven years ago we looked at three different types of aerators to use on the pastures," Graham said.

"We thought the one we bought would be used until it wore out.

"But the soil has improved so much the

aerator has been sitting out near the shed with grass growing around it."

* The Maddocks will host a Living Soil Field Day, tomorrow, July 27, at their Yackandandah farm, 9.15am-1.30pm.

Guest speakers will include southern NSW farmers and DPI soil health project officer Nathan Heath.

Topics will range from living soils to beef trends and marketing options.

For more details phone 02 6020 9676.

