

# Reducing carbon could be a dirty job, but this farmer will do it

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SINCE abandoning chemical fertiliser for a natural formula, Darryn Smith has felt his soil soften, seen worms return and watched the veterinary bill for his 180 cattle fall dramatically.

In his words, the ground at his Western District farm has gone "from dead to being alive".

What he cannot see, but knows is happening beneath his toes, is a slow rise in the amount of carbon stored in his soil. And along with a growing number of farmers, he would like to be compensated for reducing Australia's carbon footprint.

"If they are going to pay people for carbon stored in trees, why not for grass?" he says.

Soil carbon was thrust into the public debate in January, when Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull launched a broad — and as yet undeveloped — "green carbon" plan that he said could cut Australia's greenhouse gas emissions by 25 per cent. This included not only boosting soil carbon, but investing in reforestation and biochar — effectively adding a form of charcoal to the soil.

There have been markedly different estimates about the sorts of cuts possible through these techniques.

Some suggest it is equivalent to Australia's annual emissions. This is questionable. What is not disputed is that there is capacity to capture greenhouse gas by boosting photosynthesis in the 70 per cent of viable farming land estimated to have been degraded through clearing, burning and use of chemicals.

Among the boldest supporters of soil carbon is John White, an engineer turned co-owner of Ignite Energy Resources, which uses Gippsland brown coal in carbon-enriching biological fertiliser.

He estimates that about 300 years' worth of Australia's annual emissions have been lost from the soil. "The faster we can activate all the 500 million hectares of cropping and grazing lands in Australia — and then all the areas in China and India and



Doing the ground work: Timboon dairy farmer Darryn Smith has switched to a biological fertiliser that is improving his soil, luring the worms and reducing his vet bill. It's also storing carbon.

PICTURE: ANGELA WYLIE

Africa and the Middle East — to be actually sucking the carbon dioxide down from the atmosphere, the better," he says.

Mr White, who lobbied Mr Turnbull to embrace soil carbon when he was environment minister, would like to see a radical overhaul of the Government's proposed emissions trading

scheme to allow farmers to opt in and receive a fixed carbon price of \$5 for every tonne stored.

The Government's position is that agriculture — responsible for about 16 per cent of national emissions — will not be included in the scheme until 2015 at the earliest. In part, this

is because it is seen as difficult to measure.

Tony Lovell, co-founder of advocacy group Soil Carbon Australia, says that while more work is needed, the quality of measurement possible is better than most people realise.

"All of the emissions currently recognised under the

Kyoto Protocol are traded on the basis of reasonable estimates that are supported by scientific data. This is the same," he says. "The market must be allowed to lead the science, not wait on it."

The Greens say soil carbon has tremendous potential, but offer a note of caution.

"Beware those who talk up

soil carbon as a way of distracting attention from our coal and petrol emissions," Senator Christine Milne says. "If we are to deliver a safe climate to our children, we will need to cut pollution across the board."

Overseas, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation has called for agriculture

to be factored into the climate treaty due to be signed in December.

The Government has been accused of not doing enough to support soil carbon, but Agriculture Minister Tony Burke says Australia's climate negotiating strategy includes a "more easily tradeable commodity".