

Beneath the Surface

August 2015

The appearance of a Regional Council car turning down your tanker track unannounced is enough to raise the blood pressure if you haven't got your stuff together.

I'm sure that in these circumstances, the Effluent Compliance Officer could be more nervous than the farmer realises. I certainly wouldn't volunteer for his job.

Although farmers are facing tough times and uncertainty, there is one thing we can be sure about: there will be no leniency for Non Compliant Effluent Systems. Spending money in this area cannot be avoided.

Unfortunately, Compliance is only one of the effluent issues. Farmers also need to choose the most cost-efficient system to manage the physical aspects of effluent. In this regard, the typical line of advice involves a lot of concrete, steel, propellers, and the power to run it all.

Before you take the gut-wrenching trip to your withered money tree, we should look at that typical and expensive advice. Do we need to follow it?

After observing hundreds of effluent ponds throughout the country, let me make a few comments:

Effluent is a reflection of your feeding system. When I see a heavily crusted pond, it tells me that the cows are not utilising their feed very well; they're struggling to digest their food efficiently. Poor digestibility gives me another clue: something is not right with the feed quality.

The opposite is also true. Ponds with little or no crust invariably have a lot of natural activity in them. That's the result of a feeding programme that enables the cows to effectively process most of the food that's available to them.

Another observation: We consistently find that the physical appearance of the pond directly correlates to a farmer's soil management techniques.

Properly balanced soil conditions carry beneficial aerobic bacteria. When these good bacteria are carried through the feed and into the cow's gut, they assist the animal's digestion. That means less undigested solids end up in your pond.

There's more good news. When these good bugs do end up in your effluent pond, they help break down the solids and they also convert the nutrients into forms that are more easily taken up by plants.

That's the good cycle.

There's also a bad cycle. When your soil is unbalanced, it forces the good aerobic bugs to go into hibernation. That means less good guys in the grass, less good guys helping your cows digest their food, and less good guys keeping your pond in a liquefied, nutrition-rich state.

In the absence of good bacteria, bad anaerobic bacteria will dominate. These bad bugs are the cause of the crusting, sludge, and odour in your pond.

Cause vs. Symptoms

In this short article, there's no space for me to unpack the complexities that lie beneath the issues I've raised. But my point is this: to deal with the cause of your pond crust, you have to see the larger interconnected picture. You need to analyse the wider system that feeds into and affects your effluent pond.

If you don't, all you'll end up doing is spending a lot of money merely treating the symptoms of your pond problems.

And who can afford to do that?

