



Tool 6.3

Assessing soil health

'Look, smell, feel' tool

This can be done in conjunction with the earthworm tool or as a separate exercise. Use a spade and dig a square (about 20cm by 20cm) to a depth of 10cm and take 8–10 samples from different areas in the paddock. Record your observations in the table:

Action	Yes	No
<p>The 'Look' Test:</p> <p>Does the soil surface have the right amount of groundcover, ie, >70% in high rainfall areas) and litter (>1,500 kg/ha)</p> <p>Are the plant crowns at or below the soil surface (elevated crowns indicate soil loss)?</p> <p>Any evidence of earthworm castings, worm holes (to aid water infiltration) or spider activity?</p> <p>Is the soil a dark, chocolatey colour (generally, the darker the soil, the higher the organic matter)?</p> <p>Are there lots of plant roots?</p> <p>Would you want to live here if you were a small animal?</p>		
<p>The "Feel" Test – rub the soil between your fingers:</p> <p>Does the soil feel soft and crumbly (coarse, gritty or gravelly and stony would indicate a sandy texture and/or low water holding capacity)?</p> <p>Does the soil break easily into particles the size of bread crumbs (indicates good structure and high levels of organic matter)?</p> <p>Is the soil moist, soft and easy to dig up (hard, dry soil indicates low water-holding capacity)?</p> <p>Is the soil surface soft and friable (easily penetrated by the point of a pencil)?</p>		
<p>The 'Smell' Test – pick up a handful of soil:</p> <p>Does a handful of soil smell fresh and earthy?</p>		

The more "Yes" boxes you ticked in the table, the healthier the soil in the sampled paddocks.

While you can't change your soil type, you can influence soil quality by increasing groundcover and organic matter levels (see procedure 6.2).

Use this simple table to record your observations for each of the samples taken in a paddock. Repeat the sampling at the same time next year in similar locations in a paddock. Track the trends over time to see if your management practices are also improving the health of your soil.