

# [***Undie-standing soil health***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:69KJ-YY91-JD34-V2B8-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

South West Natural Resource Management (South West NRM) recently resorted to checking its undies to examine the quality of the local ***soil***.

You didn't misread that - the environmental expert group buried seven pairs of cotton underpants in a Busselton paddock for 11 weeks in an experimental trend that originated at a Queensland University, called the '***soil*** your undies' challenge.

South West NRM manager sustainable agriculture Peter Clifton said measuring ***soil health*** was notoriously difficult, and that by using this seemingly obscure method the more holes that appeared in the fabric the better.

The study meets with the organisation's aim of driving farming innovation through adoption of economically viable sustainable technology and practices.

"The more activity, or cotton eaten by microbes, the healthier the ***soil***," Mr Clifton said.

"It's not always visible to the naked eye but holes and damage indicate the ***soil*** is teeming with life.

"Keeping this microscopic ***soil*** community happy and healthy is an important focus for farmers who understand optimal ***soil health*** will ensure best possible outcomes for the size and quality of crops they can produce".

The undies were dug up in late October.

"Five different treatment areas were used in three separate plots each, creating a total of 15 plots, with a pair of undies buried in each," he said.

"The results were quite mixed from barely touched to some with gaping holes, and surprisingly, the variations existed even within the same ***soil*** treatments.

"We have shown there is probably a lot of variation and error in the result, so for more conclusive evidence we would need to create a lot more replication, about 45 pairs in total".

South West NRM recognises this practice is not scientifically accepted, but was cheap and fun.

"Cotton underpants can give an indication of ***soil*** biological activity, but a more quantifiable test should be used if you are trying to find a difference in outcome between various treatments through a trial," Mr Clifton said.

"A more practical approach is to focus on a series of indicators that are cheaper and easier to measure than biology - like organic carbon, pH, compaction, water repellency and disease - with the theory that getting these levels right will create a good environment for healthy ***soil*** biology".

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