

Rural

Poo-eating dung beetles worth a billion dollars a year to our economy, says researcher

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[Dung beetles can make a \\$1bn contribution](#) (ABC News)

Dung beetles may be best known for eating cow pats, but their work on the ground is estimated to contribute more than a billion dollars in environmental and economic benefits each year.

Charles Sturt University researcher Professor Leslie Weston is leading a national research project looking at the economic value of the insects and the specific impacts they have.

"Dung beetles are extremely important to the ecosystem because they recycle cattle and sheep manure by putting it into the soil, which improves pasture growth," she said.

"A reduction in flies also benefits people who have to live and work in outback regions."

She expected the economic value of the insects could be more than a billion dollars a year.

"Primarily that's because they contribute to carbon sequestration, mineral and nutrient recycling, and also the important value they have in reducing the pest burden," she said.

"So we're expecting this research will give us a more accurate indication of how valuable these creatures actually are."

The five-year project will involve surveying dung beetles across Australia to gather more information about what species are found where and which have best adapted to different climates.

Three new species

Another element to the \$23 million project will be the introduction of three new species.

"Right now we have more than 500 species of native dung beetles that inhabit marsupial and other organic matter," Professor Weston said.

"There are also 23 species that have been imported from Africa and the Mediterranean and they're well adapted to larger manure patties.

"What we're trying to do now is expand the range of dung beetles, particularly those suited to conditions in inland Australia."

The first of the three species will arrive this year and researchers hope to rear them en masse and then release them onto properties.

Understanding the benefits

Meat and Livestock Australia received Federal Government funding to help pay for the project.

MLA's sustainability innovation manager Doug McNicholl said it would help producers understand the benefits of dung beetles.

"In addition to investigating new beetle strains and giving some existing species a population boost, the project will quantify the economic and environmental benefits beetles provide to the red meat industry," he said.

"We'll also learn more about how to look after these little critters so that they can continue to do their good work into the future."

Professor Weston hopes farmers will be interested in learning how to better manage dung beetle populations.

"We hope farmers will be interested in finding out the appropriate drenches that won't harm the dung beetle populations on farms and how to better manage the timing of the drenches," she said.

"On my farm at Coolamon there are three species of dung beetles that have established over the past six years and I've noticed a very big reduction in the fly burden since we moved there."

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