

Dung beetles battle on

BY ALLISON RUDD

ANOTHER species of dung beetle has been released in Southland as a natural dung-reducing trial.

In September, about 500 beetles were released on a Tukurau dairy farm in a New Zealand first. Last Wednesday another 100 paua dung beetles were released, half on a lifestyle property on the outskirts of Invercargill owned by Michael and Winsome Skerrett, and the rest on a sheep and beef farm at Mataura.

Female dung beetles make dung balls, tunnel down into the ground and lay an egg into each dung ball. Hatched larvae eat their dung ball as they grow, turning the faeces into a sawdust-like material which becomes a soil fertiliser.

The Tukurau beetles were about the size of house flies, but paua beetles, named for their metallic blue bellies, are more than twice that size.

"They're like cockroaches," Mr Skerrett said.

Environment Southland senior biosecurity officer Randall Milne said each type of dung beetle had different meal preferences.



"The smaller ones like runny dairy cow dung and these ones like their dung more solid. They like horse and beef cattle poo, and sheep droppings too. It's amazing what you learn in my job."

The releases are being supervised by the national Dung Beetle Release Strategy Group, which has been trialling beetles in this country for a decade. In 2011 the group was granted permission to import 11 species.

Mr Skerrett, a Maori kaumatua who does some work for Environment Southland, said last year's release "got his attention" and when he heard the council was looking for somewhere to trial the paua variety he offered his land.

"We have two horses and plenty of horse dung and these ones are more suitable for my property. At least, that's what we think."

Property owner Robin Greer said the Tukurau beetles had "gone to ground".

"We haven't seen much of them. With 500 in a 4ha paddock there are plenty of places for them to hide in."

Little critters: Michael Skerrett (left) and Environment Southland senior biosecurity officer Randall Milne release paua dung beetles last week on the lifestyle block on the outskirts of Invercargill owned by Mr Skerrett and his wife Winsome.