

WINTER WHEAT FERTILITY KICKS INTO HIGH GEAR

Some producers may need to make up for last year's reduced fertility plans.

By Colleen Scherer, managing editor

Wheat harvest was finishing up at the beginning of August for most areas as preparation for the 2010 winter wheat crop was gaining importance. A few factors and new products could affect fertility decisions for winter wheat programs.

Last year's fertilizer situation caused many farmers to hold off on their fertility plans, leaving retailers holding the bag or warehouses full of high priced fertilizer that was difficult to move. The stock market crashed, and fertilizer prices dropped, but it was too late for farmers and retailers. The result was a lot of nutrients didn't get applied last year.

"For the past two years, farmers have been mining the soils pretty hard," said Dan Froehlich, Ph.D., agronomist, Mosaic Company. "Some may get by with this for a while, but soils will need to be replenished in the future. Corn and soybean producers withheld some nutrient application last year, but not as many farmers held back on wheat fertility. Approximately, there was a 20 percent cutback in phosphorus and a 10 percent to 15 percent cutback in nitrogen."

As a result of the fertilizer situation last year, Froehlich said retailers are holding off storing large amounts of fertilizer now. "Retailers are likely going to error on the short side of supply than being too long this year," he said.

MAKING UP FOR LOST NUTRIENTS

The decision producers face this year is whether to make up any large fertility losses they caused if they cut rates last year.

"Some farmers may need to apply more nutrients this year if they didn't last year," said Jeff Wessels, precision ag manager and agronomist, Cargill, Oxford, Neb. "Low commodity prices have prevented some farmers from applying optimum levels of fertilizer. We see about 80 percent of our businesses applying the nutrients that are needed, but there's 20 percent that decide it's never the right time to apply the optimum amount. They forget that they are always playing catch up with their fertility program."

Wessels also noted that other nutrients besides nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium may need extra application in

winter wheat. "Other nutrients producers should consider for the next season are ammonium chloride (which is typically applied in the spring) copper sulfate and potassium chloride. The ammonium chloride gives the plant a bump to help fight disease issues. It's like a vitamin to the plant," he said.

Greg Conway, area manager for Crop Production Services in North Central Kansas, agrees that micronutrients will be important to focus on this season. "The need for copper is getting bigger," Conway said. "That will call for more tissue testing to determine the appropriate levels."

Mosaic's Froehlich added that the need for sulfur continues to increase in all main crops. He added zinc to the list of nutrients as well. "With less sulfur in the air and no triple super phosphate, we can't supply this nutrient to the soil fast enough," Froehlich said.

Froehlich reminded that soil testing is not an accurate indicator of the sulfur needed. "Soil tests for sulfur are pretty worthless and are not reliable. Tissue testing is more reliable. Another challenge is whether a producer puts on the crop removal amount versus the uptake amount."

The biggest challenge for retailers will be farmer education. "Farmers are beginning to learn what it takes to get their yields to the next level," Froehlich said. "That may mean re-evaluating N, P, K needs, but it also may mean adding more micronutrients. The key will be to make sure the applications make farmers their return on investment."

CONSIDER OTHER PRODUCTS

Besides the traditional N, P and K products, a few new or innovative products could be useful for this year's winter wheat production.

Agrotain is launching three new formulations of their products for the upcoming season. According to Jeff Whetstone, vice president, global marketing, Agrotain International LLC, will offer Agrotain Ultra, Agrotain Dry and Agrotain Plus EZ Flo. Agrotain Ultra is a new higher concentrated liquid formula with a reduced rate on urea, an

example being 4 quarts per ton down to 3 quarts per ton. This formulation will replace the current liquid Agrotain formula and offers less product to store.

Agrotain Dry is a new formulation for granular urea. This high concentration formula reduces the amount used from 4 quarts to 3 pounds per ton of urea. "We reduced the volume by weight compared to the liquid formulation so that there's less to handle and store. We also created this product to be freeze-proof so that it's easier to store in the northern climates in the winter where liquid product needs to be stored in a heated facility, which also saves energy," Whetstine said.

Agrotain Plus EZ Flo is a urease inhibitor with a second nitrogen stabilizer that is designed for use in bulk handling systems and quickly suspends in liquid nitrogen. The rate remains the same, but the new denser product allows for a one-third reduction in the space required for storage. "This product was changed from a powder to a granular for easier flowability and handling of larger volumes," Whetstine said. "As a result, the packaging has changed from a 30-pound bag to a 45-pound bag because of the increased density with the formulation change."

Cargill's Wessels recommended the relatively new MicroEssentials SZ, which consists of nitrogen, phosphorus,

sulfur and zinc and can increase phosphorus uptake by up to 30 percent. "Our producers use MicroEssentials SZ and run it exclusively through their air seeders," Wessels said. "It flows nice, and it doesn't draw moisture, making storage much easier."

Dan Spicher, regional distributor for BioBased USA, recommends the new product BinBusterXP on winter wheat this fall. BinBusterXP is a nano-colloidal, surfactant-like product that will enhance a plant's ability to take up nutrients and water from the soil, according to the company. Spicher has field-size yield trials on winter wheat with the product in Montana and the Dakotas and has found a dramatic increase in the size, volume and mass of root systems of the plants where BinBusterXP has been applied. In addition, wheat heads were half an inch to an inch longer than untreated crop in the same fields.

At the time, this article went to press, Spicher was waiting to harvest this year's crop to determine the product's impact on yield as well as quality. Spicher also has field-size plots on spring wheat, barley, (both feed and malt), camolina, corn, soybeans, canola, lentils, alfalfa and potato. Spicher has plots and rate trials with his dealers in North Dakota, Montana, South Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, Washington and northwestern Minnesota. **AG**



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