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HIGH FERTILIZER PRICES: WHAT TO DO?

Recently, fertilizer prices have been higher and supplies of some nutrients have been tighter. Yet most realize, and research continues to confirm, the critical role of fertilizer use in profitable crop production. Here are some suggestions for keeping fertilizer bills as low as possible without compromising the yield that brings much needed revenue.

Account for nutrient supplies already in the soil. When fertilizer costs increase and supplies tighten, soil test results provide the best guidance for deciding which nutrients should be applied and how much of them to use. Taking nitrogen credits for previous legume crops and using a soil nitrate test, where applicable, are also recommended.

Account for nutrient supplies on the farm or nearby. If you have access to manure, whether it's on your farm or your neighbor's, use it as effectively as possible.

Time nutrient applications for highest efficiency. Apply nitrogen close to the time of crop need, such as the spring. Where possible, apply manure ahead of grass crops.

Place nutrients for greatest efficiency. Generally, banded nutrient applications provide higher first-year recovery of applied phosphorus and potassium than do broadcast applications. If short-term economic decisions dictate banding phosphorus and potassium at rates less than those of crop removal, producers and advisers may want to build in a plan for replenishing soil nutrient supplies in the future, when economic conditions improve.

Lime soils that are too acid. Liming reduces soil acidity and helps make many nutrients more available while reducing toxicities of other elements, like aluminum. Maintaining proper acidity levels improves fertilizer use efficiency and improves nodulation and nitrogen nutrition of legumes.

Allocate money to the right nutrients. When more than one is needed, response to a single nutrient will be limited if only it is added. A balanced approach, supplying some of each needed nutrient, has the best chances of maximizing the effectiveness of all applied.

Prioritize fields and areas within fields. Allocating nutrient funds across the farm should be based not only on soil tests, but also on economic evaluations of each field or field area. Consistently profitable fields or field areas should get the nutrients they need to maintain production and revenue levels.

Examine yield goals. Since many nutrient recommendations are based on yield expectations, setting realistic yield goals is important.

Efficient nutrient use is possible only when informed decisions can be made. Keeping soil test information up-to-date, identifying profitable fields or field areas, using all nutrient sources available, liming, and adopting nutrient management practices founded on proven scientific principles ensure the greatest chances for success.

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