

Quality standards still concern

By DIETER KRIEG
HARRISBURG — Is the farmer getting the fertilizer nutrients he pays for?

People in the industry say they are.

But the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture says it isn't necessarily so and it has sampling results which the Department claims proves their case.

Ironically, the fertilizer people have test results - supervised and performed by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture - which they claim gives credibility to their side of the story as well. According to supervised sampling of dry bulk-blended fertilizers at a fertilizer plant, and subsequent tests thereof at both a private and state laboratory, indications are that an analysis may indicate a shortage of fertilizer ingredients even though the formula was indeed correct when it was blended. Industry spokesmen say that the experiment offered profound credibility to their claim that the quality tests don't tell the whole story. They point to the fact that the fertilizers in question were formulated and mixed properly, with the completed

blend adding up to what is supposedly guaranteed, but that tests may still show deficiencies.

Those conclusions were drawn as a result of a Fertilizer Quality Workshop that was held in mid-December of last year at a fertilizer plant near Mill Hall in Clinton County.

Official tests by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture serve a need and purpose, the fertilizer people agree. But they have also blemished their business with misunderstandings and allegedly false accusations, they protest.

While some official tests have caused embarrassment and cuts in profits for some bulk blenders, it has caused the majority of fertilizer dealers to feel unjustifiably burned. The result has been something of a battle to gain not only higher standards for the industry, but a better understanding between farmers, agribusinesses dealing with fertilizer, and the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.

While most of the confrontations and discussions have concerned the Agriculture Department and the fertilizer people, the

farmer-user is anything but a pawn in the case. Spokesmen for both the industry and the Department of Agriculture say that farmers should definitely be getting their money's worth when they're buying fertilizer. There are different interpretations to that, however, and that in itself causes some of the misunderstanding.

In order to polish their image and perhaps improve their record for delivering the proper blends of fertilizer, some 40 bulk blend fertilizer dealers attended the Fertilizer Quality Workshop last December. The day-long affair was organized by PennAg Industries Association, an organization of some 400 Pennsylvania agribusinesses. Cooperating in the educational program were The Fertilizer Institute (TFI) of Washington, D.C., The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), and the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.

Technicians from the Agriculture Department were on hand to demonstrate proper fertilizer sampling techniques. Several samples were taken and the results have since been distributed

to participants. The figures show that even under the closely supervised conditions at the workshop, deficiencies were not avoided. On the other hand, in some cases one or two fertilizer ingredients came out on the plus side.

In the first sample, taken as blended fertilizer was discharged from a conveyor belt, the analysis was to have been 31-10-10. It turned out to be 29.26, 9.67, 10.72. In a second sampling of the same product after it was loaded onto a fertilizer spreader, the results showed an analysis of 28.14, 10.08, 10.47. In the latter test, a "D-tube" was inserted down through the coned heap of fertilizer.

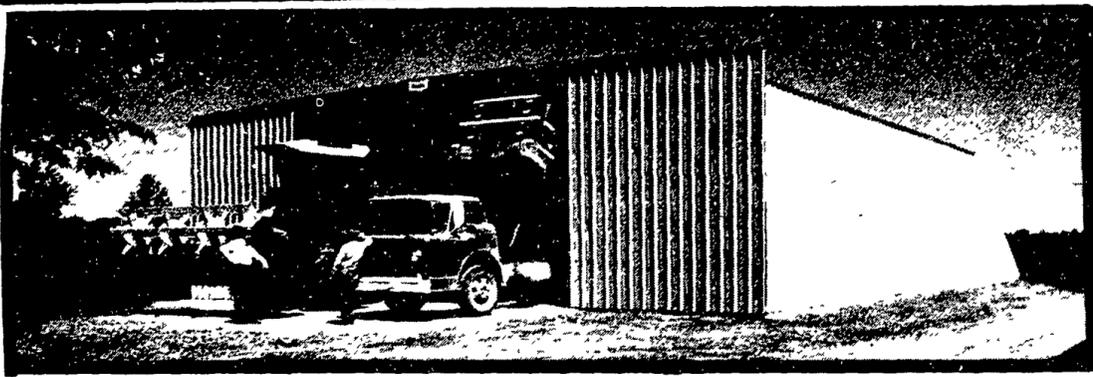
All samples were taken by a trained employee of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. Each sample was split, with the second portion going to Ed Huber, chief chemist of Agrico Chemical Company of Baltimore. Huber had taken part in the educational program and ran the tests for comparisons. His respective results for the aforementioned samples were: 30.38, 9.85, 10.00; and 29.55, 10.10, 10.31.



Ed Huber of Agrico, Baltimore, holds up samples of screened fertilizer ingredients which demonstrate how segregation may cause problems.



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