

Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Each year farmers around the country spend untold dollars on whiz-bang kinds of products that are supposed to make their soil more productive. These "additives" have been around for years, repackaged, re-labeled and re-introduced now and then. But the principle is the same — some kind of product that can be added to the soil to make it grow better crops.

Some of these "snake oil" products have common characteristics:

They're usually sold in small quantities and applied at a very low level;

They cost a lot per ounce or per gallon;

They're usually not available through reliable farm supply stores;

They're not backed by national advertising and sales campaigns;

They usually contain so-called "secret" ingredients;

They lack a credibility base — that is several years of testing and research and farmer experience.

Reputable agricultural researchers, including those in many land grant colleges and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, have experimented with these soil additives over the years and just about every one has proven worthless. And yet farmers continue to buy them, and that just amazes me.

Here in this area, with the research and extension arms of several land grant universities, the facilities of various Department of

Agriculture units and the knowledge and testing of numerous reputable companies, farmers still buy an unknown product from an unknown salesman who just happens to be in the barnyard.

If those additives really worked and really saved fertilizer or seed dollars, don't you think extension agents would be their biggest supporters? And wouldn't agricultural researchers hawk their virtues at field days and winter meetings? And wouldn't other farmers be willing to admit that they had tried them with good success?

Unfortunately, soil additives seem to be in the same category as gas savers for automobiles. You always hear those tales about the miracle carburetors that have been invented, only to be bought up by large oil companies who don't want to see the American motorist get a break.

Some salesman will tell you the same thing about his miracle products — that the universities are in cahoots with the fertilizer companies and therefore won't test these miracle products or won't give them good recommendations even though they know the products work.

Well, if you believe that line then how can you believe anything that the ag colleges or the Department of Agriculture say? Their only purpose is to help farmers to be more productive and if

there were a miracle product they would be the ones who would tell you about it.

Consider the other innovations — time, energy, and money savers — that have come to agriculture over the past decade. Didn't the ag colleges test them? And weren't the extension agents out there plugging away, trying to get you to try them? New varieties, new chemicals, new tillage techniques.

Consider no-till as an example. I know extension and research workers at the University of Delaware were very active in the early seventies developing and modifying this technology for Delaware conditions. And as they demonstrated success with it, farmers began "experimenting." But they weren't really experimenting. They were simply demonstrating to themselves what the research and extension folks already told them — that no-till was, in fact, a way to save energy and labor and produce equal or better crops.

Believe me, when soil additives that work are available, the ag college experts are going to know about them and have data to support their claims. So when the snake oil peddler comes around touting his miracle products and asking for your hard-earned bucks, suggest that he talk first with the soil scientists at your state university.

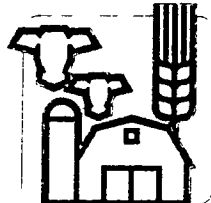
If they'll recommend his product then maybe you'll consider it along with other good products and chemicals

that have been recommended.

Some states have laws protecting farmers from fly-by-night salesmen with fly-by-night products. But most haven't made the effort because they haven't had big problems. These quick buck artists typically come into an area, sell a few gallons or pounds and then move on before too many questions are asked.

It's not until much later that state officials even find out about the problems. And usually the cost, shared by a number of farmers, has been relatively small.

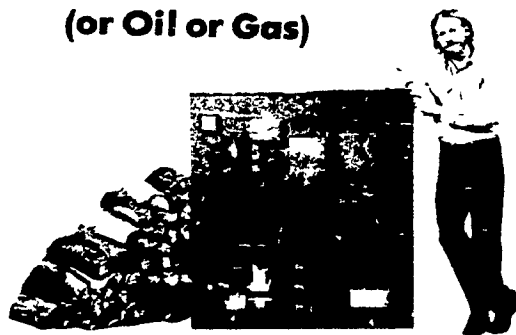
So you can't look to the government for control. It must be done by the farmers themselves by simply not buying anything that doesn't have a proven record of success



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