

Consider Sulphur deficiency in high-yield crop programs

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Wheat growers are reminded that the persistent use of high-analysis N-P-K fertilizers over the past decade, plus the popularity of high-yielding varieties that tax soil nutrient reserves, has made U.S. acreage more susceptible to sulphur deficiency.

Without adequate sulphur, wheat cannot be expected to reach its full potential in terms of yield, quality or protein content, says Bob Morris, agronomist at The Sulphur Institute, an international trade group based in Washington, D.C.

"A sulphur deficiency can also prevent your crop from making efficient use of applied nitrogen fertilizers," he claims. "Top-dressing additional N to a field that is even marginally sulphur deficient can throw off the crop's internal nutrient balance and actually induce a more severe sulphur deficiency in the crop."

Sulphur, which aids protein and chlorophyll formation in plants, is one of 16 basic elements needed to

support plant life. In the past, soils may have received ample sulphur from the atmosphere to support crop yields. Significant sulphur was also included in traditional plant foods like ammonium sulfate and ordinary superphosphate.

"Today's high-analysis N fertilizers — such as urea, ammonium nitrate and UAN solution — do not contain any incidental sulphur," Morris says. "What's more, the higher yields produced by farmers today remove more nutrients from the soil."

Cleaner air resulting from pollution-control regulations have also decreased the amount of "free" sulphur that crops get from the atmosphere, he adds.

"We're still getting sulphur from the atmosphere," says Morris, pointing to environmental concerns about acid rain. "But in some regions we're evidently not getting enough S from the atmosphere to support today's high-yielding crop varieties."

A 100-bushel wheat yield

removes 25 pounds of sulphur per acre from the soil.

To produce optimum yield and make efficient use of applied N, a wheat crop should contain one unit of S for every 10-12 units of N. A narrower ratio of applied sulphur and nitrogen will help maintain this ratio, Morris says.

Following is a summary of results from sulphur fertilization, as recorded recently by major land-grant universities:

- At Oregon State University, topdressing 10 pounds S increased wheat yields from 48 to 69 bushels per acre.

- At Kansas State University, with a nitrogen rate of 60 pounds per acre, 60 pounds S boosted wheat yields by 6.1 bushels. When N rate was increased to 120 pounds per acre and no extra S was applied, only a 7.5-bushel increase was recorded.

- At Penn State University, on heavy clay soils where S deficiency is generally not a problem, top-dressing 30 pounds S boosted wheat

yields 9.3 bushels per acre.

- At the University of Georgia, 25 pounds S increased wheat yield 5.2 bushels per acre.

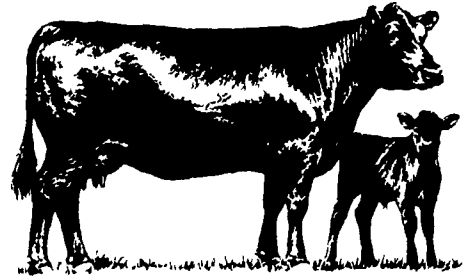
- At N.C. State University, wheat yields jumped 10.3 bushels when the university applied 80 pounds S per acre.

- Morris says that crop responses to sulphur may not always be as dramatic or as profitable as those recorded in the above studies. "But these data demonstrate how important

sulphur can be in a high-yield program," he says.

"If you don't need sulphur in your fertilizer program, then don't use it," Morris concludes. "The point is that S deficiencies are more likely to occur today than in previous years, and growers would be wise to keep tabs on their soil's sulphur status."

Farmers should consult their fertilizer suppliers about the most economical sources of S in their immediate area.



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