

Retailers To Work With Growers On Hypoxia

ST. LOUIS, Mo. — Retailers have a great opportunity to help educate their customers about hypoxia and other nutrient management issues.

That is the conclusion of the Agricultural Retailers Association's hypoxia task force, which met for the first time on March 19 to determine the role retailers will play in resolving hypoxia and other nutrient issues.

Hypoxia is a problem in the Gulf of Mexico. It is due in part to an excess of nitrogen and phosphorus. Those nutrients feed sea algae. Too much of this algae can cause reduced sunlight penetration, loss of aquatic life, and a decrease of oxygen in the water. Some scientists believe the excess nutrients are carried to the Gulf from the Midwest by the Mississippi.

"Hypoxia is a big issue. It's really about nutrient management," said Dr. Jerry Hatfield, director of the National Soil Tilth Lab, USDA-ARS, in Ames, Iowa.

Hatfield gave the group a scientific look at nutrient management and shared research that helps define the problem.

"We're dealing with a complex ecosystem with a lot of checks and balances," said Hatfield. There are tile-drained soils with high amounts of natural organic matter producing nitrates, which are very mobile

in water. The issue is complicated by its direct correlation to precipitation, which produces a great variation among the years, he said.

"Our job is to determine how these weave together into a story that explains how the soil, nutrients, rivers, wetlands and precipitation all fit together," Hatfield said.

"Retailers play an important role in nutrient management," said Paul Kindinger, ARA CEO and president. "They have the most contact with farmers. To get information across to growers, we will work with retailers because farmers will continue to buy goods and search for information from their retailers. The educational process should start with the retail community."

Larry Thomsen, executive vice president of agronomy for West Central Co-Op, agrees that retailers are critical in getting information to growers. "Knowledge transfer is an important aspect of our role in the industry," said Thomsen. "The goal now is to help keep producers in business, not just sell product."

"The 21st century farm supply business will be built on relationships," Thomsen said. "Working with customers on issues such as nutrient management will lead us into the next century."

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