

Time To Review Nutrient Balances In Fields

NORCROSS, Ga. — The 2002 growing season brought wide variation in yields, so it is important to review nutrient balances for the 2003 season. Of course, the best approach is to take soil tests and plan nutrient applications according to their results. For most fields, the plan for 2003 should be to follow what was planned already. But where 2002 yields were unusually high or unusually low, some adjustments may be appropriate.

If the plan calls for maintenance applications, then changes needed may be minor. Recalculate needed application rates based upon the harvested yields. If build-up nutrient rates are part of the ongoing plan, and yields were lower than expected, the extra nutrients left from the 2002 crop will help speed up the progress to the build goal. Or 2003 applications can be adjusted downward slightly. If 2002 yields were above expectations, the 2003 nutrient applications may need to be ratcheted upward to stay on course.

Very likely, the changes from the plan will be small. But for some fields that yielded 100 bushels per acre or more below expected levels, there may be reason to make adjustments in fertilizer applica-

tions plans. "Left over" nutrients can be estimated from the change in expected crop yield multiplied by the crop removal per unit of yield.

Every field's nutrient plan should be reviewed before final decisions are made on fertilizer application. Go back to the most recent soil tests, then review crop removals and fertilizer and/or manure applications since the samples were collected. Calculate a net nutrient balance, and the expected impact on soil tests using the relations above. Make adjustments to the nutrient plan for fields where the calculated progress is not meeting expectations.

Collect new soil samples if none have been done in the last three or four years. It may be helpful to have tests taken more frequently during a major build-up period.

A new Excel spreadsheet tool, PKalc, can be downloaded from the PPI Website: www.ppi-far.org, under the listing, "Toolbox Resources." PKalc provides a simple worksheet to compute estimated phosphorus and potassium nutrient balances over a period of up to 10 years. While this "check-book" approach is a crude estimate of nutrient balance, it offers a useful guide to help keep nutrient management on target.

701 E. Linden St.
Richland, PA 17087
717-866-6581



1283 Joni Miller Rd.
Oakland, MD 21550
301-334-3977

701 E. Linden St., Richland, PA 17087

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