

HIGH FERTILIZER COSTS LEAD FARMERS, ADVISORS TO CAREFULLY EVALUATE BUDGETS

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If you took soil tests on fields this fall, you're on your way to potentially putting your fertilizer dollars where they're needed the most. If you haven't, put the task on your calendar for next spring, says Richard Halopka, University of Wisconsin (UW) Extension Crops and Soils Educator based in Clark County.

With commercial nitrogen fertilizer prices approaching \$1,000/ton-plus and phosphorus and potassium prices following suit, farmers and their crop consultants are having to make careful buying decisions, he adds. A current soil test will help farmers determine which nutrients are needed and how much should be applied to each field.

"This might be the year where we need to say: 'These three fields are going to get this dose of fertilizer, and these fields something different.' We may have to set up multiple applications to offset some of those higher fertilizer costs," Halopka advises. "That's what farmers should be doing, and it also helps them reach their highest profit potential in that crop."

Be sure to also take nitrogen credits and acknowledge the value of manure where applicable, he reminds. "The previous crop is very important. If you had a legume crop and are going into corn, you have a nitrogen credit going into corn. Livestock manure value went from \$10-12/1,000 gallons, based on book values for dairy manure, to exceeding \$20-23/1,000 gallons now compared to six months ago. That's just reflecting the increase in costs of commercial fertilizer. Commercial nitrogen fertilizer, back in May when I was advising farmers on sidedressing corn, was about 40 cents/unit. I just checked a few weeks ago (one price check only), and the price was at 88 cents/unit," Halopka says.

"When you look at manure value, it literally doubled," he adds. "If you have a beef feedlot operation, a hog operation, or a poultry operation – or whatever the livestock – push some numbers."

Farmers and their crop advisors should utilize University of Wisconsin's [Nutrient Management Fast Facts](#) leaflet, Halopka says, to figure a crop's maximum returns to nitrogen (MRTN). The two-pager contains UW nutrient recommendations for alfalfa, corn, and soybeans; legume and corn nitrogen credit guidelines; nitrogen:corn price ratios; a fertilizer analysis and conversion table; and soil pH liming information. It also offers manure information on estimating available nutrient content as well as planting and harvest data, including the amount of nutrients removed by various crops at harvest. For more detailed information, check out the publication [A2809: Nutrient application guidelines for field, vegetable, and fruit crops in Wisconsin](#) by Carrie Laboski and John Peters, University of Wisconsin.

Some crop and livestock farmers are working together, trading crop supplies and manure. "When you bring manure into a system, you're also bringing in some weed seeds and other things," Halopka cautions. He knows of several situations where crop-manure trades are being instituted, however.

Generally, he concludes, "85% of crop yield is going to be related to the growing season and Mother Nature. The best thing we can do during the winter is calculate the best use of our dollars available for fertility in order to capture yield and economic return – and have a profitable crop year."

More Nutrient Management Resources from Wisconsin

A Nutrient Management Helpline is now being offered by the University of Wisconsin Nutrient and Pest Management (NPM) Program and Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) nutrient management team. A helpline schedule is available [here](#).

A virtual nutrient management farmer education class will also be offered four days this winter: Jan. 4, Feb. 7, March 1, and March 15. Each Zoom class (10 a.m.-3 p.m.) will provide the basics of nutrient management and an introduction to SnapPlus Nutrient Management Software. For additional information, [click here](#). Register [here](#).

The NPM Program also provides a popular [educational video channel on YouTube](#).

For information on SnapPlus Nutrient Management Software, [visit here](#).

For additional information on nutrient management from WI DATCP, [visit here](#).