

There's no trick to reduced nitrogen

You've heard stuntmen and daredevils like Eivel Kneivel say things like "Don't try this at home!" just before doing some incredibly dangerous and, by appearances, stupid thing.

Well, when it comes to making money by reducing nitrogen use on corn, the daredevils have all come and gone. They've learned the tricks to making the dangerous idea of cutting back on fertilizer easy for just about any corn grower. And what they've learned is something you definitely can now do safely at home.

It's taken awhile. Some 25 years ago, when Dr. Alfred Blackmer and other research scientists at Iowa State University and a few other universities began looking seriously for the science behind nitrogen use recommendations of 1 to 1.2 lb. of nitrogen per bushel of yield, they found the supporting data to be questionable.


The lack of sound science prompted the farmer directors of the Iowa Soybean Association to begin its own search for truth. This search has been supported by the soybean checkoff and with significant additional funding from the Iowa Legislature and the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship. Searches, even those for the truth, cost money. Initial financial support from the soybean checkoff has been leveraged with additional funding from the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship's Integrated Farm and Livestock Management program, some of which has been earmarked specifically for our use by the Iowa Legislature. Additional support has come from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. All of this has allowed the association's different On-Farm Network™ projects to expand from just a few farms in 2000 to the point that they reached every county in the state this year.

What early On-Farm Network cooperators like Ron Heck, Dennis Friest, Jim Andrew and scores of others have learned by comparing normal and reduced nitrogen application rates in replicated strip trials has shown them the way to lower application rates.

Not every farmer can cut nitrogen rates, but many have already done it on their own. When we announced a project last spring to provide a cash incentive for 100 growers to cut nitrogen use to 100 lbs. or less on a field up to 80 acres in size this past year (paid for with an NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant), Christine Borton, our programs administrator, was immediately inundated with calls. Most of the growers in the program were routinely using lower nitrogen rates, so cutting back to 100 lbs. or less was not much of a stretch for them. (This project is covered on pp. 6 & 7)

Cutting nitrogen application rates may require a change in timing, application method, or fertilizer form. We've covered some of this in this issue of Field, Farm & Watershed, but to get the whole story, please join us at the annual Nitrogen Conference next month at the Airport Holiday Inn in Des Moines next month to hear what these farmers have done through the Iowa Soybean Association On-Farm Network Nitrogen Conference. You'll learn what they did and hear about a dozen or more other growers who have studied nitrogen use on their farms.

Take a look at what other farmers have learned and then, by all means, do try this at home. If you don't want to do it alone, though, contact the Iowa Soybean Association and we'll gladly help you through the process. ♦



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