

Investing In Opportunity

Growers and crops require more focus on nutrition.

BY DEE WEEDA

ARE your customers fertilizing like they did in the 1980s? If they are, they've likely wasted their time and money, particularly if they're investing in the latest, highest-yielding hybrids, varieties, and cultivars. And you're probably leaving income potential on the table as well.

"The crop genetics we have today are built for speed, they're built for yield," says Vaughn Goodman, plant nutrition specialist with Wilbur-Ellis in Kuna, ID. "Just throwing a 200-200-200 dry blend on potatoes in the fall doesn't cut it anymore."

Goodman, a self-proclaimed "fertilizer junkie," is in charge of evaluating new products for Wilbur-Ellis and bringing the company's crop advisors and customers up to speed on the products. That's no small job in the company's Pacific Intermountain business unit, which deals with 165 crops across Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, and part of Wyoming.

Goodman looks at placement strategies, production chemistries, and application methods for every new product in order to identify where the product can best maximize grower value. "We have cutting-edge growers who want new things and new information. They want to be on the edge of what is new because of the economic changes in agriculture. If we don't bring them new things, someone else will," Goodman explains.

Glen Franzluebbbers, technology director for Central Valley Ag (CVA), headquartered in Oakland, NE, echoes these sentiments. "If our customers aren't profitable, we're not profitable. We're seeing more customer interest in plant nutrition because of higher yield potential and increasing crop removal rates — and of course the increased investment in corn and soybean genetics," Franzluebbbers says.

CVA's precision ag program — Advanced Cropping Systems — builds on grid sampling to demonstrate the need for plant nutrients and sets the stage for getting the right fertilizer out at the right time, right rate, and in the right place for each field. Advanced Cropping Systems is the springboard for educating customers on plant fertility and for growing fertilizer sales.

New Product, New Information

In the quest to meet grower demands for products and information that helps them improve profitability, both Wilbur-Ellis and CVA have invested in bringing new fertilizer technology to their customers in the form of MicroEssentials premium fertilizer. This phosphorus-based



Right, Glen Franzluebbbers of Central Valley Ag (behind desk) says that customers are expressing more interest in plant nutrition because of higher yield potential and crop removal rates.



fertilizer from the Mosaic Co. is available in three formulations and incorporates the correct ratios of critical nutrients — nitrogen, phosphorus, sulfur, and/or zinc — into uniform granules. With all nutrients in each single granule, distribution is consistent within the specific management zone, giving every plant a better shot at getting the essential nutrients it needs to produce the best results.

"With a product like MicroEssentials, we have something new to go to our customers with and talk to them about," Franzluebbbers says. "This premium fertilizer helps them better meet the nutrition needs of today's genetics and gives growers better fertilizer efficiency and nutrient management almost to an individual plant level. And it gives us an edge over our competition."

CVA offers MicroEssentials SZ (12-40-0-10-1) because soils in the area are traditionally deficient in zinc.

"We're also looking at incorporating MicroEssentials SZ into our precision application program as the P2O5 source," says Franzluebbbers. "With sulfur and zinc in one homogeneous granule, we get very even distribution of nutrients and improved availability of nutrients to the plants."

"Growers here have questioned the validity of spreading a



Wilbur-Ellis' Vaughn Goodman believes that retailers have to bring customers new product and help them understand how to get maximum effectiveness from a fertility program for those products.

blended fertilizer containing just 2 pounds of zinc per acre," he explains. "This product makes agronomic sense to our growers." Because phosphorus and sulfur are provided in the appropriate ratios, crop uptake of phosphorus is improved 10% to 30%. This means plants more efficiently use the nutrients provided and customers get a greater return from their fertilizer investment.

Fertility To The Forefront

Though there has been nothing new in the way of phosphate fertilizers for 40 years, MicroEssentials has a different approach to nutrient delivery, and introducing the product requires an investment in agronomic training to help company personnel and growers conquer the plant-nutrition learning curve — which may have been somewhat neglected in the past.

Both Franzluebbbers and Goodman recognize that the time spent educating growers on plant fertility hasn't been directly proportionate to revenue potential and that changing plant nutrition needs also creates a need for increasing emphasis on grower education. In 2008, fertilizer accounted for 73% of sales for CVA, a 5% increase over 2007. Yet only about 35% of past grower education efforts have been devoted to plant fertility.

In light of industry changes, CVA recently hired an agronomist, Neil Schumacher, whose responsibilities include helping train both staff and growers on the key factors that influence plant nutrition: varying nutrition needs, new genetics, and plant removal rates.

"Grower education is very important to our business because if they understand what we are doing, the products we offer, and the benefits those products provide to them, it makes sales and increasing volume much easier," Franzluebbbers adds. CVA has seen good grower response and increasing sales over the two years it has offered the product.

At Wilbur-Ellis, 1½-day internal training sessions and business unit sales meetings each year are venues for staff training on fertility. However, Goodman sees the investment in grower education as disproportionate to the percent of revenue fertilizer generates and to the growth potential it offers. Nutrition gets about 30% of the spotlight in his organization — and Goodman admits increasing the focus is difficult due to regulatory requirements for education on crop protection products in his area.

Yet the situation is not unique. According to the 2008 CropLife 100 survey of the industry's top retailers, fertilizer sales weigh in at a hefty 40% to 60% of revenue, followed by sales of crop protection products (between 20% and 30%), then seed (maybe 20%), and finally custom application (less than 5%).

Where does your business stack up on grower education focus in relation to income generated?

For retailers who offer MicroEssentials, help is available to educate employees and growers about the product as well as promote it. To supplement face-to-face training, Mosaic also offers a convenient on-line training tool to bring sales, agronomy, and fertilizer personnel up to speed on MicroEssentials. Two e-learning courses explain what MicroEssentials fertilizer is, how it works, and the value each of the three MicroEssentials products provides to growers. The courses are under the "retailer tools" tab at www.microessentials.com. CCA credit is available for completing both courses. ▶

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