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CAN YOUR LOCAL FERTILIZATION PROGRAMS BE IMPROVED?

Are you looking for ways to boost yields to the next level? Are you concerned about increasing the efficiency of your nutrient applications? Have you ever wanted to test something new and see if it really makes a difference? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, then you are the type of person who would benefit from on-farm research.

What is on-farm research? It is nothing more than using a little bit of science to discover something new. It doesn't have to be complicated—in fact, the simpler, the better. Just come up with a good question, like “Is starter fertilizer beneficial?” or “Are higher soil tests an improvement over lower ones?” Ask around or maybe do a little reading to see if anyone else has thought about this already or done something in your area.

Spend a little time planning. Set aside a few hours during the time of year that is the least busy for you. Think about how to lay out your experiment. Talk to someone in the Extension Service. Let them know what you are planning to do. They might give you some guidance or even offer to help you.

For some ideas on laying out an experiment, visit www.ppi-ppic.org/northcentral, click on “Training materials,” then click “Planning and analyzing on-farm research.”

Decide what measurements you want to take. You know you'll want to measure yield. Look into renting or borrowing a weigh-wagon to measure the yields on each strip you have in your experiment. This is a good idea even if you have a yield monitor. If you are doing a fertility experiment, then a soil sample representative of each strip is a good idea. You might want to measure some quality aspect too, such as grain protein or oil content.

Figure out if the differences you measure in your experiment are real. Do you have Microsoft Excel? Chances are you do. Did you know Excel will easily do your analysis for you? The web link above gives step-by-step instructions on how to use Excel to find true differences among your treatments. Just work through the example to try it once.

Improved nutrient management requires a process, not a procedure. By conducting on-farm research, you'll begin to find management practices that work in your area under your management style. As you discover and incorporate better practices, your nutrient management program will evolve and come ever closer to optimization. Although on-farm research requires extra work and planning, the gains in production, profitability, and environmental protection can make it all worthwhile.

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