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LIME NEEDS AND TRENDS IN ARKANSAS

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ABSTRACT

Consumption of agricultural lime in Arkansas declined significantly during the past seven years. During each of the past four years, lime consumption was lower than any time since 1960. The quantity of lime needed for optimum crop production on Arkansas' soils is estimated to be 2,678,700 metric tons (MT) (3,000,000 tons) based on University of Arkansas soil testing summaries. Since 1980, less than 286.728 MT (320,000 tons) of lime have been used each year. It is the natural tendency for most soils in Arkansas to become more acidic with time. Periodic additions of agricultural limestone, however, can neutralize soil acidity and help to maintain soil productivity. Nitrogen fertilizers, applied for the production of most agricultural crops, may also contribute to the acidification of soils. The annual consumption of acid-forming nitrogen fertilizers in Arkansas increased from approximately 223,225 MT (250,000 tons) during fiscal year 1974-75 to about 392,876 MT (440,000 tons) by fiscal year 1983-84. At least 2.5 times more lime was needed than was used, just to neutralize the residual acidity from acid-forming nitrogen fertilizers alone, during the same period. Shifts in crop hectareages did not account for the magnitude of decline observed in lime consumption. If lime consumption does not increase in the future, and if acid-forming nitrogen fertilizer consumption follows the current increasing trend, soil acidity will cause a decline in the yields of acid-sensitive crops.

INTRODUCTION

Liming has been regarded for many years as an essential component of prosperous agriculture in the Southern United States (Adams and Pearson, 1967). It is the natural tendency for most soils in the southern U.S. and Arkansas to increase in acidity over time. Periodic additions of ground agricultural limestone can neutralize acidity near the surface (0 to 15 centimeters) of most soils. If allowed to go unchecked, soil acidity may build up to levels that cause crop yield reductions or failure.

Thompson and Sabbe, in 1969, estimated that 7.9 million metric tons (MT) (10 million tons) of lime would be needed to bring all of the acid soils in Arkansas to pH 6.5. Sabbe and others (1973) summarized the fertility status of Arkansas soils based on soil samples submitted to the University of Arkansas Soil Testing Laboratory between 1961 and 1964. They found that 72.9% of the soil samples submitted had a pH of 6.0 or below and required lime. The last report on lime needs in Arkansas was by Chapman (1976).

The objectives of the work presented here were: (1) to update the knowledge regarding soil acidity and lime needs in Arkansas; (2) to attempt to determine what factors have most likely influenced past trends; and (3) to examine the potential impact current lime trends may have on future agricultural productivity.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Data from the Arkansas Crop and Livestock Reporting Service (1981a, 1981b, 1982, 1983, 1984) were used to determine the hectareages planted in the following crops between fiscal years 1966-1970 and 1983-1984: corn, cotton, rice, sorghum, soybeans, oats, and wheat. Lime consumption and acid-forming nitrogen fertilizer (Andrews, 1954) usage data were derived from annual Arkansas State Plant Board summaries for the fiscal years mentioned previously. Numbers of lime vendors and lime producers were determined from unpublished reports by the Arkansas State Plant Board for fiscal years (FY) 1974-1975 and 1983-1984. Lime needs were based on soil testing summaries for the state, compiled by the University of Arkansas. Current lime needs were estimated using the following procedure. The percentage of the sampled (soil samples submitted to University of Arkansas in 1983) hectareage with pH values less than 5.8 was calculated. This factor was then multiplied by the total hectareage in each county used for crops and pastures, with $1,000 or more of agricultural products sold annually. The resulting total hectareage with a pH value of 5.8 or less was then multiplied by a conservative lime application of 0.8929 MT per hectare (one ton per acre). This yielded a conservative estimate of the total tons of lime needed on Arkansas soils for maximum crop yields. This quantity of lime would also help to improve and/or maintain soil fertility levels.

Recent trends in crop hectareages, acid-forming nitrogen fertilizer consumption, numbers of lime vendors and producers, and agricultural lime consumption were compared to historic trends summarized by Chapman (1976).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following 1954, lime consumption has varied (Figure 1). Prior to 1976, there was an increasing trend. Since 1976, the trend has been one of decline. Lime use during FY1983-1984 was lower than at any time since 1959, when more than 312,515 MT (350,000 tons) of lime were sold.

Lime needs have increased from slightly more than 0.89 million MT (one million tons) in the early 70's to approximately 2.7 million MT (three million tons) currently (Figure 2). In FY1974-1975, there were 25 liming material producers registered with the State Plant Board that supplied Arkansas. Currently, there are more than 40. Approximately
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Figure 2. Trends in Arkansas’ lime needs versus lime consumption since fiscal year 1969-1970.

Figure 3. Trends in acid-forming nitrogen fertilizer consumption versus lime consumption in Arkansas since fiscal year 1969-1970.

Most nitrogen fertilizers used in Arkansas for agricultural crop production can contribute to the acidification of soils (Andrews, 1954; Frizzell and Maples, 1984) and are termed acid-forming nitrogen fertilizers. Costs of these nitrogen fertilizers have more than doubled since 1975 in Arkansas. Unlike lime consumption, acid-forming nitrogen fertilizer consumption has significantly increased since FY 1974-1975. Nitrogen fertilizer consumption trends, prior to 1969, roughly paralleled trends in lime consumption (Chapman, unpublished).

Trends in the consumption of acid-forming nitrogen fertilizers and lime since 1969 (Figure 3) do not exhibit the parallel relationship observed before 1969. Instead, lime use has steadily declined, while acid-forming nitrogen fertilizer use has increased.

The amount of lime needed to neutralize the residual acidity from acid-forming nitrogen fertilizer usage in FY 1974-1975 was almost 291,846 MT (327,000 tons) (Table 1). More than 446,450 MT (500,000 tons) of lime were applied in FY 1974-1975. This was approximately 156,259 MT (175,600 tons) more than was needed just to counteract the acidity from nitrogen fertilizer. In FY 1983-1984, approximately 392,862 MT (440,000 tons) of acid-forming nitrogen fertilizers were sold (Table 2). The lime needed to neutralize the residual acidity from the fertilizer was approximately 570,462 MT (639,000 tons). However, only 235,408 MT (263,644 tons) of lime were used during FY 1983-1984. Only 41 percent of the lime needed, just to neutralize the acidity caused by nitrogen fertilizers, was actually used.

If the application of acid-forming nitrogen fertilizers continues to increase, or levels off, while lime use continues to decline, soils in Arkansas may become so acidic that yields of acid-sensitive crops (soybeans, wheat, corn, grain sorghum) may drastically decline. With the exception of the FY 1982-1983, the trend in the number of hectares planted to some of our major crops (corn, cotton, rice, sorghum, soybeans, oats, wheat) was similar to the trend in acid-forming nitrogen fertilizer consumption (Figure 4). The impact of hectareage reduction programs on total hectareage in these crops was evidenced in FY 1982-1983.

Soybeans are planted to more hectares in Arkansas than any of the other crops. Because soybeans are capable of acquiring most of their nitrogen needs via the symbiotic nitrogen fixation process, an opposite trend between acid-forming nitrogen fertilizer use and soybean hectareage may be expected. Such opposing trends were observed between FY 1969-1970 and FY 1983-1984.

Trends in acid-forming nitrogen fertilizer use were most closely mimicked by trends in the combined hectareage of wheat and rice. With the exception of soybeans, other crops planted to large hectares (e.g. wheat, rice, sorghum) will continue to use large quantities of nitrogen fertilizer. At least 90 percent of the nitrogen fertilizers used will pro-
Table 1. Lime Needed to Counteract Acidity from Acid-Forming Nitrogen Fertilizers in Arkansas (Fiscal Year 1974-1975).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nitrogen Material</th>
<th>Metric Tons Sold</th>
<th>Metric Tons Lime Needed Per MT Material*</th>
<th>Total Lime Needs (MT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ammonium Nitrate</td>
<td>74,989</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>44,993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anhydrous Ammonia</td>
<td>8,920</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>26,136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nitrogen Solutions</td>
<td>27,401</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>36,170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ammonium Sulfate</td>
<td>5,639</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>8,525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urea</td>
<td>100,037</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>176,022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>253,056</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.06</strong></td>
<td><strong>291,860</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Method of W. B. Andrews (1954)

Table 2. Lime Needed to Counteract Acidity from Acid-Forming Nitrogen Fertilizers in Arkansas (Fiscal Year 1983-1984).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nitrogen Material</th>
<th>Metric Tons Sold</th>
<th>Metric Tons Lime Needed Per MT Material*</th>
<th>Total Lime Needs (MT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ammonium Nitrate</td>
<td>62,318</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>37,391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anhydrous Ammonia</td>
<td>7,215</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>21,139</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nitrogen Solutions</td>
<td>70,956</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>93,134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ammonium Sulfate</td>
<td>4,031</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>5,886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urea</td>
<td>249,742</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>412,912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>352,862</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.06</strong></td>
<td><strong>370,462</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Method of W. B. Andrews (1954)

bably be the acid-forming types. This would indicate a continued need for lime in neutralizing the residual acidity from nitrogen fertilizers, not to mention native acidity.

Rice acreage nearly doubled from FY1974-1975 to present and the hecetareage of other crops being irrigated has increased. In the Grand Prairie region of the state, some of the lime needs are being supplied by wells with irrigation water that has relatively high levels of calcium carbonate (Gilmour and Ferguson, 1981). The use of such irrigation water in the Grand Prairie, and possibly other parts of the state, has decreased agricultural lime consumption. However, the magnitude of decrease in lime consumption attributable to such water is unknown.

Many Arkansas farmers have erroneously assumed the lime needs of their entire field were being met when using well water with a high calcium carbonate content to flood or furrow irrigate. In reality, only the upper portion of the field may receive appreciable amounts of lime when such irrigation water is used. The lower portions of such fields may be in need of lime for crops in rotation with rice. Rice tolerates acid soils and flooding better than other major crops. This is because flooding the soil causes the pH to approach neutrality, until the water is removed. Soil testing summaries (unpublished) indicate that such fields are not being adequately sampled or limed. At present, much improvement can be made by increasing the sampling of soils and well water to accurately determine the lime needs for crops in rotation with rice.

Agricultural production inputs such as nitrogen fertilizer, fungicides, herbicides, and insecticides are usually considered short-term investments because of their annual application/response nature. Lime may, in many instances, provide an annual return on investment comparable to the aforementioned inputs. Yet, most farmers consider lime a long-term investment with a relatively low annual rate of return. This is because agricultural limestone, on the average, may continue to neutralize soil acidity for three or more years after application.

In recent years, more and more farmers have been forced to rent the land they farm in order to maximize the production efficiency of their inputs and simultaneously minimize their cost per unit of output (i.e. crop yield). Many of these farmers can only get short-term rental agreements with their landlords. Because liming involves a large capital expenditure, and because there is a risk of not being able to rent the same land in successive years, these farmers are reluctant to use lime.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Shifts in crop hecetareages did not account for the magnitude of decline observed in lime consumption during the last 14 years. The supply and availability of lime has remained relatively constant during the same period. It appears that increased transportation costs have contributed to the declining use of lime in Arkansas' agriculture. Yet, farmers have not curtailed the use of other production inputs such as nitrogen fertilizer, even though these input costs have increased in a manner similar to lime costs. If soil acidity increases beyond the surface 15 centimeters (six inches) of soil into the subsoil, it may be economically impossible to correct by typical direct incorporation of lime (Frizzell and Maples, 1984).

Landlords and farmers need to adopt wise soil management to include lime where needed to prevent potential yield-limiting soil acidity.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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**LITERATURE CITED**


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