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THE ROLE OF FERTILISER IN MAXIMISING OUTPUT ON SMALL FARMS

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INTRODUCTION

The trend of fertiliser usage in the mid to late Seventies was for farmers to increasingly buy more of the basic fertilisers in the Autumn and so avail of the early delivery allowances. The effects of the recession and the shortage of cash, combined with a reluctance to borrow due to high interest rates, have substantially altered the picture. Now, roughly 60% of all fertilisers are sold during February and March.

Changes by farmers in their fertiliser buying for the months September to December, inclusive, during the 1978–82 period are interesting. In 1978, 18% of all fertilisers were bought during these months but in 1979 purchases were reduced to 15%; in 1980 to 8%; in 1981 to 5% and in 1982 to a low of 4%. This move away from spreading phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) in the Autumn/early Winter period has something to do with management decisions but more with cash flow and interest rate considerations.

Due to the geographic position of our region, farmers are discriminated against in regard to fertiliser prices. They are the people who need the encouragement through cheaper fertilisers but instead they pay substantially more. The added transport costs to the North West plus the small unit purchases by individual farmers, giving reduced discounts, increases the prices by £3 to £4/tonne. Thus the small farmers of the North West, who are least able, have to pay more than their cohorts on the well-structured farms of the South and East. This is a discriminatory situation which requires attention and resolution.

PROMOTION OF FERTILISER USAGE

Efficient use of grass and conserved fodder gives the most economical production of livestock or milk. Fertiliser for grass production should, therefore, be the primary farm input. A role of the North Connacht Farmers’ Co-operative (NCF) is to ensure that its suppliers obtain the most appropriate fertilisers for this particular purpose at the keenest prices. All the recommendations and management factors associated with fertiliser requirements, and usage, which have been researched by An Foras Taluntais (AFT), and developed by An Chomhairle Oifuna Talmhaiochta (ACOT), are communicated to farmer shareholders through our monthly news-sheet and local papers.

Over the years, NCF has organised competitions, Open Days, etc., to highlight the advantages of the most efficient use of grass. In addition, six complete silage making units were provided by the Co-operative in its milk collection region, in order to encourage silage making. Milk quantity and quality competitions are held in a number of branch areas. The winners of these competitions show a significant improvement in management. This is associated with the improved utilisation of grass and silage, indicating better use of fertilisers. These factors are reported and extensively highlighted in our newsletter, “NCF News” and local papers.

A few examples of the good results which have emerged from our competitions indicate the value of effective fertiliser usage. One farmer, Donal Daly, improved the average milk yield of his cow herd from 650 gallons to 900 gallons in one year,
due largely to improved pasture management, rotational grazing and high quality winter feed. A second farmer-member, Zac Dowd, has a herd average of 1,000 gallons, with an input of 10 cwt of meals, which again indicates above average utilisation of grass and silage.

**NCF AND THE WESTERN DRAINAGE SCHEME**

Because NCF recognised that a considerable amount of land in the North West could never be productive unless properly drained, we allotted substantial financial and manpower resources into the Western Drainage Campaign. A feature of this involvement in drainage has been the emphasis on subsequent works, such as ploughing, cultivating and re-seeding drained and reclaimed land. This effort has met with an encouraging response and last year we had an almost 100% increase in sales of NCF grass seed mixtures through our branches. A number of demonstrations of these improvements are held annually, in conjunction with ACOT, highlighting the important features of reclamation and re-seeding work. Unfortunately, however, the Western Drainage Scheme could have been more effective if its administration had been improved. Presently the applications being examined are at least 18 months old and many development plans are being delayed due to lack of manpower in the Farm Development Services (FDS). The farm development elements of the Western package have also been poorly promoted and little progress has been made.

**DEVELOPMENT AGENCY**

NCF Co-operative is a development agency. Its role is to help farmer shareholders develop their resources to their maximum potential, thus increasing their incomes. All advisory and educational bodies in the West agree that increased milk production is the No. 1 priority because it offers the best opportunity for farmers on limited acreage. The EEC policies, however, conflict with this view, as exemplified by the presence of milk levies and threats of further levies on increased production.

Many elements of the Western package are geared towards dry stock production and there are now suggestions that the FDS in the disadvantaged areas may continue for beef and sheep producers only. Our view on this anomaly has been well documented, both here and in Brussels. We intend to pursue our objective of obtaining the same status for our farmers as exists for the EEC hill areas, many of which have demographic or structural disadvantages considerably less severe than the handicapped areas of the West of Ireland. All aspects of farm development are now further threatened by recent pronouncements both here and in Brussels. The suspension of grant aid under FDS, taxation for all farmers, and further threatened levies on milk production, can only lead to reduced expenditure by farmers on vitally necessary farm development works. Combined with this is the high age structure of our farmers and the absence of a land policy. To combat this latter problem there is an urgent need for a long-term leasing policy plus an attractive farm retirement scheme which would ensure that the management of the land passed into the hands of younger and more production orientated farmers. The cheapest and most effective method of increasing production, and farm income in the present climate, is through increased use of fertilisers. In this regard, it is interesting to note that fertiliser as an input is one of the relatively good value production aids. Taking 1975 as a base (100), all farm inputs had increased in cost to 216 in 1982. Feeding stuffs (202) and energy (332) far exceed the rise in the cost of fertilisers (171) which are still relatively good value.
Producing more and better grass, whether for grazing or winter feed, can help to offset the ever-increasing costs which have to be borne on the farm. Some years ago a farmer in the NCF area achieved 700 gallons milk/cow from grass alone, with a cow herd of very ordinary dairy merit. He had a rotational paddock grazing system and made good silage. Contrast this with the average 500 gallons milk/cow of many of our suppliers who supplement with meals, and it is obvious that grassland is considerably under-utilised. It is NCF’s role as a development agency to continue, in association with ACOT, to improve the situation.