

Fertiliser choice critical on 3000ha mixed arable farming operation

- Nitram Ammonium Nitrate is the product of choice
- Liquid options too inflexible
- Urea and blends do not provide precision needed



Andy Rankin relies on CF products for all his crops with Nitram and DoubleTop used in preference to all other other types of fertiliser including liquids, urea and blends.

British made ‘blue-bag’ fertiliser is the mainstay of fertiliser management across the full 3000ha of vegetable and cereal production run by Westrope Farming Ltd in Suffolk.

With nearly 800ha of high value root crops alongside 1000ha of quality wheat aimed at the milling market, taking risks with anything else simply isn’t worth it, says farm manager Andy Rankin.

“Anything that gets in the way of crops getting the nutrients they need at the time they can make full use of them, be it as a result cheaper products with low Nitrogen utilisation, poor application performance or log-jams when it comes to machinery, is simply a waste of time and money.

“We’ve looked at everything over the years, but we know we can’t beat what good high quality Ammonium Nitrate based fertiliser can offer us. We’ve never entertained urea as it’s far too risky from

a crop utilisation point of view, and liquid fertiliser application simply doesn’t give us the flexibility we need.”

Current cropping managed by the operation, based near Wickham Market, consists of 500ha of potatoes, 200ha of onions, 70ha of carrots, 300ha of sugar beet, 20ha of vining peas, 300ha of barley, 400ha of oilseed rape, 80ha of maize and the 1000ha of wheat.

All crops receive CF products

Apart from a single base application of a liquid suspension fertiliser pre-planting on the root crops, all fertiliser requirements across all crops are taken care of by CF Nitram (34.5%N) and CF DoubleTop (27N + 30SO₃).

Westrope Farming Ltd Cropping

- 1000ha of wheat
- 400ha of oilseed rape
- 80ha of maize
- 300ha of barley
- 500ha of potatoes
- 200ha of onions
- 70ha of carrots
- 300ha of sugar beet
- 30ha of vining peas

Skyfall and Crusoe form the backbone of the wheat enterprise and in the three years of growing these varieties, milling spec has never been missed, Andy says.

“We’ll apply 40kg N/ha from DoubleTop with the associated Sulphur (45kg SO₃/ha) in late February or early March and then



plan a further three top ups of Nitram to take the full N application up to around 250kg N/ha depending on yield potential.

“The second application won’t go on until late April with the final one being held back until June and I am sure it is that allied to the quality of the N source and the efficiency of its uptake that really helps build the protein and the yields.

Milling spec. achievement

“You can’t do that with a liquid – the recommendation for final application is GS32 with liquid fertilisers – and the fact that we’ve consistently achieved grade A milling specs with 13% protein contents and yields topping 10.0t/ha says it all.”

Both the barley and oilseed rape crops benefit from the Doubletop and Nitram combination as well with barley receiving 220kg N/ha and the oilseed rape getting up to 250kg N/ha.

“Unlike with the cereals, we tend to put Nitram on first in the oilseed rape – just 40kg N/ha in late February or early March to get it going – and then apply 70-80 kg N/ha from the DoubleTop towards the end of March.

“The idea is to hold back on the bulk of the Nitrogen until the point at which the crop can handle it and it certainly seems to work – we get very little lodging.”

Superior performance

But it’s not just the superior performance from CF products that impresses Andy, it’s their practicality of use as well.

“We won’t stint on giving the crop what it needs when it needs it and to be able to do that consistently we need the flexibility of being able to go out and perhaps spray and apply fertiliser to the same crop on the same day.

“I therefore need two methods of application and I can’t use the same machine i.e. the sprayer, to do both jobs without losing timeliness.

“Also from a safety point of view, I don’t get the issue with Nitram and DoubleTop that I potentially do using liquid fertilisers, especially on high value root crops, when I could give myself a scorch problem by applying it in the wrong weather conditions.

“I know the liquid fertiliser manufacturers say you get less yield off the headlands using a solid fertiliser over a liquid, but if I am honest we’ve never felt we were sacrificing production in any way from using Nitram and DoubleTop.”

Liquid economics don’t impress

Andy gives the labour saving argument short shrift, too. As long as fertiliser stocks



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are strategically well placed, then we can achieve good outputs from one operator spreading and loading themselves, the same as running a sprayer operation.

“We’re committed to producing high value across everything we grow whether it’s in a vegetable crop or a wheat one.

“When you’ve got variable costs approaching £2500/ha for some crops and the risk of not hitting premium market specs, the economics of saving a little bit on labour just don’t stack up.

“Plus a fertiliser spreader is not really an expensive piece of kit – especially when you compare it to a sprayer – so I don’t think the economic argument for liquid fertiliser is realistic either.”

Blends too hit and miss

Having just made the decision to go back to tyres on his main workhouse tractors after relying on tracks for several years, soil compaction from carrying high volumes of water on the land is also a consideration, he says.

“We used to run Quadtracs but tyre technology has come on so much with

regard to minimising ground pressure, we’ve gone back to wheels and the tractors are so much more versatile as a result.

“I don’t think relying on hauling large volumes of liquid across the land just for fertiliser would really tie in with our commitment to paying greater attention to soil structure and minimising the potential damage we do from wheelings.”

Blue bags tick all boxes

When it comes to other forms of fertiliser, blends are not an option either, Andy says.

“We used to use an Ammonium Sulphate blend, but it won’t spread accurately at 24.0m let alone the 32.0m some of the arable land uses.”

“I am not a fan of urea because of the loss of Nitrogen to the air from volatilisation in anything but perfect conditions. I’m against it from a potential scorch point of view in root crops, too, and if it’s not suitable for those, it won’t make it on to our cereals.

“When you’ve got seven different farming accounts, as we have in our share farming arrangements, it makes a lot of sense to keep things simple from a product point of view and being able to use Nitram and DoubleTop across everything really helps with that.

“At the end of the day, we want to produce high volumes of high value crops and make the best margins we can whilst paying as much attention to the environment in which we live and work, as we can.

“Of all the fertiliser options out there, only the blue bags really tick all the boxes.”