

MEDIA RELEASE

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**East Coast drought pasture recovery advice**

Much of the East Coast of the North Island is starting to come out of yet another dry summer and autumn, leaving most livestock farmers well short of their optimal winter feed situation.

Sheep and beef farmers from East Coast to the Wairarapa will have to decide soon whether to try for autumn pasture growth, or turn their focus to the spring season.

There are a number of factors to consider before applying fertiliser – not least being the higher cost this season. A lot of beef and sheep farms will be carrying reduced stock numbers already because of the long dry spell, and farmers will need to be really sure that any expenditure on autumn fertiliser is going to give them bang for their buck.

Soil temperatures are holding up well at present at around 14-15 degrees on the flat country, after dipping nearer 11-12 degrees during the rainfall near the end of April, but always decline into the winter months, bringing a halt to pasture growth until the spring.

That doesn't leave a lot of time to prepare pastures for fertiliser application and to give the product a chance to do its work before the frosts and colder weather arrive.

As soon as rain starts to fall, there is an immediate temptation to apply nitrogen (N) fertiliser to make the most of whatever growing time is left before the winter cold, but this is not necessarily the best approach, says Ballance Agri-Nutrients Head of Agro-Sciences, Warwick Catto.

'Recovering from a drought requires effective and strategic use of fertiliser, especially if the drought has been prolonged and has affected farm incomes,' Mr Catto says.

'From a fertiliser perspective, the key decision facing many will be whether to put on N to promote quick growth, or phosphate, potassium and sulphur (PKS) to maintain soil fertility. The choice will partly depend on cash reserves and partly on the overall fertility status of the farm.'

After a severe drought it is preferable that N applications be delayed for two weeks after it has rained as the soil will likely have good reserves of mineralised nitrogen, and pastures need that time to recover.

'Pastures will enjoy a natural boost after rain from residual N in the soil, and farmers should allow this to occur before applying more N. It's important to remember that nitrogen enhances growth; it doesn't start it. For N to be of any use there must be some plant growth occurring when it is applied,' explains Mr Catto.

'For best results, don't apply N fertiliser until paddocks have some pasture cover (1000 kg DM/ha). Once you have applied N, the paddock should be spelled for four to six weeks. This will give the N time to have an effect and will also help to minimise the risk of nitrate poisoning.'

Use soil tests to show the fertility status of the farm. During a drought, sulphur and potassium soil test results tend to be elevated because there is little nutrient uptake by the plants and no loss through leaching.

'Soil tests taken well after the drought has broken (one to two months) will give a more accurate picture of true soil fertility,' says Mr Catto.

'If soil test results showed that fertility was below desirable levels, then for the long-term benefit of the farm it would be prudent to apply a PKS fertiliser to raise the levels of any deficient nutrients.

'If the results showed sufficient nutrient levels to meet production goals, then it would be reasonably safe to defer PKS application until next year, and concentrate instead on using N to boost growth.'

Mr Catto suggests farmers use agro-science to guide their decision-making. Further fertiliser advice or support is available from Ballance's local Technical Sales Representatives on 0800 222 090.

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