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The growing influence of fertiliser in feeding the world

Climate change scenarios are adding to the potential for massive food shortages around the world, increasing the need for farmers to produce even more from their land.

Each year the world's farmers put about six billion gross tonnes of food on mankind's table, and each year seven billion people munch their way through almost all of it.

But that is already not enough, warns Larry Bilodeau, Ballance Agri-Nutrients' chief executive, and the situation can only get worse with population forecasts set to add up to two billion new mouths by 2030.

'As long as population growth continues to run out of control, we face the prospect of having to produce twice as much from our farms, even as the available farming land base shrinks. On top of that, we are now told that among the many impacts of climate change we can expect farm output to be savaged in several regions, whether because of rising sea levels, floods, storms, heat or drought.'

An Oxfam report released in the later half of 2009 warns that climate change could "reverse 50 years of work to end poverty" to create "the defining human tragedy of this century".

The report "Suffering the Science – Climate Change, People and Poverty" combines scientific evidence on climate change with the experience from the communities where Oxfam works in almost 100 countries to reveal how climate change is already hitting poor people hard.

'It's taken us about 10,000 years to lift global food production to its present level,' adds Mr Bilodeau, 'now we are suddenly going to have to try to double that output in just a couple of decades.'

He says there is no doubt that fertilisers have aided the rise in production, but the solution is not simply to apply even more fertiliser.

'At Ballance we understand that soil needs the right balance of nutrients to deliver the best crops, and we have pursued a scientific path in our own forward planning and advice to our customers. There is no justification for applying too much fertiliser, but we can help in determining the precise nutrient mix to apply to individual crops or paddocks.

'Other gains will be necessary in crop genetics to improve plants' tolerances to drought, heat, wind and insects, for example, but science can step in now to help the world's farmers bring their soils up to maximum production levels, and to maintain that year after year.

'It's not like we have any other choice,' says Mr Bilodeau. 'We either feed the world, or look on as millions starve. About 25,000 people die each day because of malnutrition right now.'

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He says manufactured fertilisers should not be viewed as “chemical” because their components all occur naturally. Products such as superphosphate, for example, are enhanced to make them more readily available in the soil, but nothing foreign is added in the process.

Crop yields are undoubtedly improved by applying fertilisers. The International Fertilizer Industry Association (IFA) reports that UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Fertilizer Programme trials in 40 countries over 25 years delivered a 60 percent weighted average increase resulting from the best fertiliser treatment for wheat.

Because of the level of crop production required for farmers to respond adequately to market demand, organic farming is also not an option on a global scale. Organic farms are typically less intensive than other farms and less productive.

The late scientist Norman Borlaug, who won the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize for his contributions to improving the world food supply through genetic selection of seeds, said one thing was certain.

‘Civilisation as we know it could not have evolved, nor can it survive, without an adequate food supply. Likewise, the civilisation that our children, grandchildren and future generations come to know will not evolve without accelerating the pace of investment and innovation in agriculture production.’

Global fertiliser use has risen steadily by about 3 percent a year up to the financial crisis in 2008, and is now back on track for similar growth, says Mr Bilodeau.

‘The world’s food supply relies on fertiliser. Without it, we would face the choice of having to halve the global population, or double the amount of land under farming. Clearly, neither is an option.

‘Smarter use of fertilisers and increased scientific involvement in agriculture are the only ways we can feed the world.’