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## **Get your timing right, and the profits will follow**

Dairy farmers considering applying nitrogen to their pastures this summer just need to get their timing right and the profits will follow, says Ballance Head of Agro-Sciences Warwick Catto.

'Timing of summer nitrogen applications is critical – you need to get nitrogen on before the dry weather sets in. Once grass growth has slowed, you are not likely to get much economic value from applying nitrogen,' he warns.

'Strategic use of nitrogen can boost feed levels, but only if it's applied to the right paddocks, at the right time. The seasons appear to be late this year, so where the first application of nitrogen will have traditionally been made in late November and the second in late December or early January, depending on conditions, farmers in most regions could safely push this timing out by a few weeks.

'Higher soil fertility will also help plants cope in water-stressed situations over the summer.'

Research by Dexcel (DairyNZ's predecessor) showed that the application of nitrogen during early summer (December/January) stimulates the development and growth of new shoots, converting the plant back to a producer of high-quality leafy forage.

Another Dexcel trial showed an extra 800 kg DM/ha and 66 kg MS/ha could be produced from December to April after 100 kg N/ha was applied, split between December and January; i.e. a 8:1 DM response to N.

'At a payout of \$6/kg MS, this extra production equates to about \$400/ha, against the cost of the N fertiliser at around \$150/ha. This is a very good direct payback, with likely additional carry over benefits in autumn, as a result of stock being in better condition,' says Mr Catto.

With greater confidence in the sector as a result of the recently announced increase in the Fonterra payout forecast, DairyNZ recommends that farmers consider the use of nitrogen to boost milk solids production.

'Despite the higher cost of nitrogen compared to a few years ago, a simple calculation subtracting the cost of the fertiliser from the value of the milk solids produced, shows this practice is profitable,' says Errol Thom, DairyNZ senior scientist.

'Other pasture benefits include less weed or summer grass invasion and less need for pasture renovation. However, nitrogen should only be applied where there are the stock to eat the extra pasture grown, otherwise N application is likely to result in loss of pasture quality.'

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Mr Catto agrees with this position, as even at the higher nitrogen prices, the results of N applications are still economic if feed utilisation is high.

'Farmers do need to consider the form of nitrogen that is best to use and importantly, the timing of that application. The best results occur with adequate soil moisture, and targeting periods when rain is expected or recently occurred to minimise volatilisation losses is ideal.

'Preferably you want to apply nitrogen to paddocks that have good soil fertility and high-producing pasture species. Research conducted at the Taranaki Agricultural Research Station has shown that pastures performed much better over the dry summer months when the soil had an Olsen P rating at optimum or better.

'The rate of nitrogen to apply can be varied according to stocking rate. If you are stocked at over 2.5 cows/ha, apply two dressings of nitrogen at a rate of 30 kg N/ha (65 kg n-rich urea/ha). If you are stocked lower than that, apply two dressings of 20 kg N/ha (45 kg n-rich urea/ha). Allow six weeks for the pasture to respond to the nitrogen before you graze it.'

To find out more about summer nitrogen applications contact your local Ballance Technical Sales Representative on 0800 222 090.