

Butler County Conservation District Assisting Farmers

The Butler County Conservation District (BCCD) has been assisting farmers with making wise economic and environmental decisions when determining side dressing nitrogen (N) rates to their corn.

The program started 11 years ago when the BCCD purchased a SPADs chlorophyll meter and started their Early-Season Corn Chlorophyll Test Program. The BCCD felt there was a need for a test that allowed farmers to make adjustments to their fields unlike the Late Season Cornstalk Nitrate Test.



Early season corn chlorophyll testing involves taking a meter reading of the fifth leaf of a corn plant when it is in the sixth leaf stage. Once a minimum of 20 samples are taken, an average is calculated for the field. Depending on the average meter reading, one of three recommendations is offered for the N sides dressing rate. For field with adequate N, no side dressing is recommended. For fields lacking N, either a recommendation of 50 pounds per acre or 80 pounds per acre of nitrogen is provided.

What helped get the program up and running was Early-Season Corn Chlorophyll Testing was an eligible practice under USDA's Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Producers in Butler County enrolled in CSP took advantage of the program to meet their requirements under their USDA contracts. Although their CSP contracts have run out, many of the farmers have continued to use the program after seeing the economic benefits.

Father and son Dairy farmers, Jeff and Jordan Kennedy have continued to participate in the Early-Season Corn Chlorophyll Testing. They have been using the results to help target weaker fields. Fields that may not have received enough N from manure applications. "With the cost of fertilizer today, we want to make sure we are not wasting time and money," said Jeff.

BCCD board member and dairy farmer Ed Thiele has been active in the program since the beginning. "With all the unknowns and variables with manure applications, cover crops and legume residual, it helps give you a better idea of what is happening in your fields," said Thiele. "Before we used to look at a field and think it was lacking in nitrogen, now this puts some science behind our decision making."

For the past 6 years, come June you can find John Geibel out in his corn fields counting leaves to see when his corn is ready to be tested. "The program has helped me to significantly reduce my nitrogen applications, while not reducing my yields," said Geibel. He is now using the meter to help with his transition to organic farming.

The program provides both an economical and environmental benefit. With today's Urea prices and traditional applications rates farmers involved in the program this have saved approximately \$8175 and reducing the possibility of 3700 plus pounds of N runoff entering streams and creeks of the County this past year.