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Apply Fertilizer and Limestone this Fall

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As farmers push towards more economical crop production, fertilizer and limestone use will increase. If Kentucky farmers continue to help feed the world, the rate of increase will accelerate during the next decade.

This has implications for the fertilizer and limestone industry as well as for farmers. For one thing, a change needs to be made in the time of application of at least part of the fertilizer and limestone. Farmers are planting corn and soybeans earlier than they were just a few years ago. This means that the spring season for applying fertilizers and limestone is being shortened. The industry is already finding it very difficult, and sometimes impossible, to manufacture and distribute the fertilizer and limestone presently being spread in the spring.

In 1966 (according to Department of Regulatory Services reports) about 85 percent of the fertilizer used in Kentucky was spread between January 1 and June 30. We don’t have the corresponding figures for limestone, but we know that more of it is spread in the spring than in the fall. If more fertilizer and limestone were spread in the fall, two industries could better serve their patrons, and the farmers would be better off if they would wait until the ground is firm enough to support the heavy spreading equipment.

Furthermore, limestone spread in the fall will react with the soil during the winter months and will be of greater benefit to crops planted the following year. Limestone can be applied to hay and pasture fields anytime during the summer and fall, and should be applied on row crop fields as soon as the crop is harvested.

Phosphate and potash can also be applied to hay and pasture fields in the summer and fall and on row crop land as soon as these crops are harvested. There will be little or no loss of these nutrients except for that carried off to steep land by water run-off during heavy rain storms. The big advantage of fall applications of fertilizers and limestone is that the job is done while the ground is firm, and a spring rush on the manufacturers and distributors is avoided.

Nitrogen should not be applied this fall for next year’s crops, except for grass seed production. (See U. of Ky. Coop. Ext. Serv. Leaf. 246, "Grass Seed Production.") For fall grass forage production, nitrogen should be applied in late July or August. In Kentucky, nitrogen should be applied at or about the time crop growth is expected to start.

A soil test should be used as a guide to determine the amounts of limestone, phosphate and potash needed.