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OILSEEDS NEWS

CANOLA NEED NOT BE RISKY

The up-front costs of growing canola need not be so high for many growers, as it is just as profitable for nitrogen fertiliser applications to be delayed or split (pre-drilled and then topdressed) as it is to apply it all before sowing, according to a leading researcher in the field.



In recent years, canola has been perceived as a risky crop to grow, with higher up-front

costs than cereals. But many years of research has found that this should not be the case, said Dr Rob Norton, Principal Agronomy lecturer with the University of Melbourne.

Hold off: Dr Rob Norton has urged growers to not apply all their nitrogen fertiliser to canola before sowing.

Urea prices are now close to \$500 a tonne on-farm, and are usually the single biggest cost to grain growers.

“The problem with (applying all nitrogen fertiliser) up-front is that it is done when the season is least known - the longer you wait the better understanding we have of yield potentials,” he said.

“Our experience is that provided the nitrogen status of the site is not really low, for example, at least 40 kilograms of nitrogen in the top 50 centimetres of soil, there isn’t much difference between splitting the applications and putting it all out up-front.”

“Topdressing needs an extra pass and timing is important - best at or near stem elongation which is when nitrogen demand is highest. In some circumstances returns can be better with nitrogen at sowing but my feeling is that this needs to be balanced with risks of low yields with poor seasons.”

Dr Norton said that a better nitrogen response at sowing occurs when soil nitrogen is low, with an assured moisture supply and a good finish to the season. Deep soil nitrogen testing as close as possible to sowing time is a relatively reliable tool for measuring soil nitrogen levels.

“The canola crop is able to compensate for lower nitrogen supply early in the season. And if the season falls over with a poor spring, then there has been a lower investment in fertiliser which saves up-front costs and also reduces any loss of crop quality, as excess nitrogen levels can lead to lower oil content in canola.”

Dr Norton has looked at data from a number of experiments in which nitrogen fertiliser applications have been split or delayed in Wagga Wagga, Forbes and Bendigo, and each one has concluded that there is no penalty in splitting nitrogen fertiliser applications.

Dr Norton’s sentiments were echoed by David Waterhouse, agronomist with Agritech Rural in Horsham.

“What I tell my clients to do is ‘we’ll put a ‘whack’ on at the beginning and then see how the season goes’,” he said.

Mr Waterhouse believes that northern Wimmera growers on the grey clay soils should only be growing canola on fallow or when there is sufficient subsoil moisture after a wet summer, following a run of dry finishes in the region.

Elders Wagga Wagga agronomist Tim Coyle said that most of his clients topdress with urea at least once and spread low rates of sulphate of ammonia on canola paddocks a few days before sowing to reduce financial risk and to lower up-front costs, in the wake of dry starts and early finishes to the cropping season in recent years.

For more information on trial results, contact Dr Rob Norton on (03) 5362 2337.

FINAL IRRIGATION TIMING CRITICAL TO SOY CROPS, SAYS EXPERT



Costly exercise: Luke Gaynor has warned soy growers that early final irrigations could cost them more than \$200 a hectare.

Soybean growers must ensure their crops have enough water to 'finish', or yields and quality could be sacrificed like they were last year, according to a leading soybean agronomist.

Luke Gaynor, of the NSW Department of Primary Industries in Wagga Wagga said this week that if the final irrigation is undertaken too early, growers could be losing in excess of \$200 per hectare in lost yields on top of reduced premium prices due to smaller seed size.

He said that the final irrigation of soybean crops in southern New South Wales and northern Victoria was too early in many

instances last year, when combined last season's warmer temperatures.

“Last year we had smaller than average seed size in our area across all varieties,” said Mr Gaynor. “It came down to too early scheduling of the final irrigation and not taking into consideration the above average temperature”.

Mr Gaynor said that the timing of the final irrigation always involves some risk. Growers need to remember to put the crop first in order to maximise yields and profits, he said.

Mr Gaynor said that insufficient soil moisture for seed development can cause yield losses up to 30 per cent in some situations.

“The goal is to have adequate soil moisture in the root-zone to ensure that the seed will obtain its maximum weight and size.”

“The optimum time for the final irrigation is when 30 per cent of the pods are mature – what agronomists call ‘P30’. Pods are generally considered mature once they have turned brown,” he said.

“If there is good soil moisture in the root-zone at P30, then no further irrigation will be required. If the soil is becoming dry within the root-zone, an additional irrigation maybe required to maximize seed weight and yield if no rainfall event is forecasted.”

“If there was a reasonable amount of rain forecasted in two or three days time, you wouldn't irrigate. But if the next one to two weeks are forecast to be dry, you would definitely irrigate to get the crop through.”

A final irrigation at this stage should be as quick a flush as possible, he said.

“Farmers need to consider if rain is forecast in the next week or so. If they irrigate and we get a big rain, than the paddock will become too wet and harvest can be delayed until the ground dries out enough to carry the harvesters” Mr Gaynor stated.

Mr Gaynor said that the crop's water use is lower at this time of the year because of less evaporation and because the crop extracts less water as it matures.

For more information, contact Luke Gaynor at DPI Wagga Wagga on (02) 6938 1657 or Dale Grey at DPI Cobram on (03) 5871 0600.
