



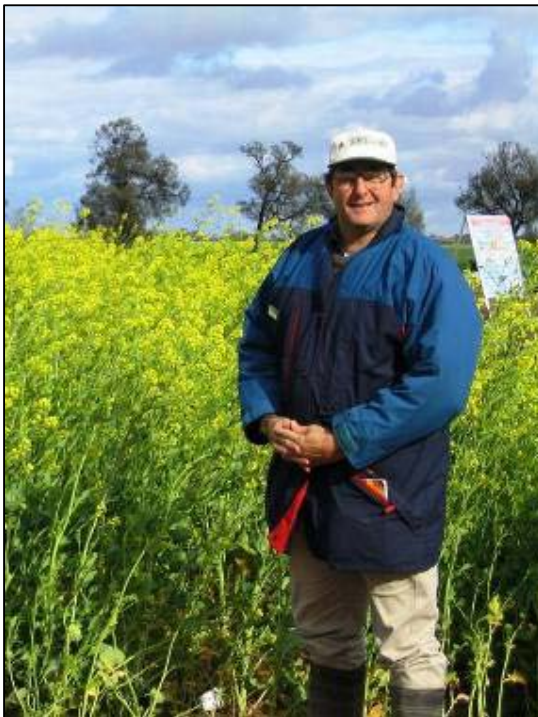
IRRIGATED CROPPING FORUM

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OILSEEDS NEWS

CANOLA NEED NOT BE RISKY



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

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.

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.
