
Fertilizer Use Optimization in Sub-Saharan Africa

Charles S. Wortmann and Keith Sones, editors

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Contents

Foreword	7
1. Fertilizer Use Optimization: Principles and Approach	9
1.1 Introduction.....	9
1.2 What is optimization?	9
1.3 Fertilizer use optimization.....	10
1.4 Fertilizer optimization tools.....	11
1.5 Using the Excel FOT.....	12
1.6 Paper versions of FOTs.....	15
1.7 Conclusion.....	17
1.8 References.....	17
2. Spatial Analysis for Optimization of Fertilizer Use	20
2.1 Background.....	20
2.3 Spatial data.....	21
2.4 OFRA Inference Tool.....	21
2.5 References.....	23
3. Integrated Soil Fertility Management in Sub-Saharan Africa	25
3.1 Introduction.....	25
3.2 Integrated Soil Fertility Management	25
3.3 Common ISFM practices for sub-Saharan Africa.....	26
3.3.1 Land application of organic resources.....	26
3.3.2 Organic resources complemented with fertilizer application.....	27
3.3.3 Crop residue management and tillage.....	27
3.3.4 Intercropping with legumes	29
3.3.5 Green manure.....	31
3.3.6 Cereal-legume rotation.....	32
3.3.7 Adding perennials to the annual crop rotation.....	33
3.3.8 Parkland agriculture.....	33
3.3.9 Biochar.....	34
3.3.10 Good fertilizer use practices	34
3.3.11 Water availability.....	37
3.4 Conclusion.....	37
3.5 References	38
4. Optimizing Fertilizer Use within an Integrated Soil Fertility Management Framework in Burkina Faso	40
4.1 Introduction.....	40
4.2 Agricultural systems of the agro-ecological zones (AEZ) in Burkina Faso	41
4.3 Soil nutrient management, including fertilizer use, in Burkina Faso	43
4.4 Optimizing fertilizer use in Burkina Faso	43
4.5 Fertilizer use optimization tools (FOT) for AEZ of Burkina Faso	45
4.5.1 The Excel FOT	45
4.5.2 Paper versions of the FOT.....	48
4.5.3 The fertilizer substitution value of other practices	48
4.6 Targeted crops by AEZ	49
4.7 References.....	50
5. Optimizing Fertilizer Use within an Integrated Soil Fertility Management Framework in Ethiopia	52
5.1 Agricultural systems in Ethiopia	52
5.2 Soil fertility management	53
5.3 Diagnosis of nutrient deficiencies in Ethiopia	54
5.4 Optimizing fertilizer use in Ethiopia	55
5.5 Fertilizer use optimization tools.....	57
5.5.1 The Excel Solver FOT.....	57
5.5.2 The paper FOTs.....	57

5.5.3 The fertilizer rate adjustment tool.....	59
5.6 Targeted crops by AEZ	60
5.7 Conclusion	62
5.8 References	62
6. Optimizing Fertilizer Use within the Context of Integrated Soil Fertility Management in Ghana	67
6.1 Soil nutrient management, including fertilizer use in Ghana.....	67
6.2 Fertilizer use and recommendations	69
6.3 Current fertilizer use	70
6.4 Fertilizer use integrated with other practices	70
6.5 Diagnosis of nutrient deficiencies in Ghana.....	71
6.6 Optimizing fertilizer use in Ghana	71
6.7 Fertilizer use optimization tools (FOT) for Ghana.....	73
6.8 Adjusting fertilizer rates for other practices and soil test information	77
6.9 Targeted crops and cropping systems by AEZ.....	78
6.10 References	81
7. Optimizing Fertilizer Use within the Context of Integrated Soil Fertility Management in Kenya	82
7.1 Agricultural systems of Kenya	82
7.1.1 Introduction.....	82
7.1.2 Agro-ecological zones (AEZ)	82
7.2 Soil fertility management	85
7.3 Diagnosis of soil nutrient deficiencies	86
7.4 Optimizing fertilizer use in Kenya	86
7.5 Crops targeted for optimization by region	88
7.6 Fertilizer use optimization tools (FOT) for Kenya AEZ.....	93
7.7 Conclusions	98
7.8 Acknowledgements	98
7.9 References	99
8. Optimizing Fertilizer Use within the Context of Integrated Soil Fertility Management in Mali	100
8.1 Agricultural systems of Mali.....	100
8.2 Current soil fertility management.....	102
8.3 Diagnosis of nutrient deficiencies in Mali.....	103
8.4 Optimizing fertilizer use in Mali.....	103
8.5 Fertilizer use optimization tools for Mali	105
8.6 Targeted crops and cropping systems by AEZ.....	109
8.7 Conclusion	111
8.8 Acknowledgements	111
8.9 References	112
9. Optimizing Fertilizer Use within the Context of Integrated Soil Fertility Management in Malawi	113
9.1 Agricultural systems of Malawi.....	113
9.1.1 Agro-ecological zones (AEZ)	113
9.1.2 Current soil fertility management in Malawi.....	114
9.1.3 Fertilizer use and recommendations.....	115
9.2 Soil diagnosis and diagnostic trials in Malawi.....	116
9.3 Optimizing fertilizer use in Malawi	116
9.4 Targeted crops and cropping systems by AEZ.....	122
9.5 Acknowledgements	124
9.6 References	124
10. Optimizing Fertilizer Use within the Context of Integrated Soil Fertility Management in Mozambique	125
10.1 Introduction.....	125
10.2 Agricultural systems of Mozambique.....	125
10.2.1 Agro-ecological zones (AEZ).....	126

10.2.2 Soil fertility management in Mozambique.....	127
10.2.3 Diagnosis of nutrient deficiencies	127
10.3 Fertilizer use optimization in Mozambique.....	127
10.4 Fertilizer optimization tools for Mozambique.....	129
10.5 Fertilizer use in an integrated nutrient management framework.....	132
10.6 Crops addressed by region for optimized fertilizer use	133
10.7 Acknowledgements	135
11. Optimizing Fertilizer Use within the Context of Integrated Soil Fertility Management in Niger	136
11.1 Agricultural systems of Niger.....	136
11.1.1 Agro-ecological zones (AEZ)	136
11.1.2 Current soil fertility management	137
11.2 Diagnosis of nutrient deficiencies in Niger	139
11.3 Optimizing fertilizer use in Niger.....	139
11.4 Targeted crops and cropping systems by AEZ.....	141
11.5 Fertilizer use optimization tools for Niger AEZ.....	143
11.6 Paper fertilizer optimization tools	143
11.7 Adjusting fertilizer rates in consideration of other practices and soil test information.....	146
11.8 Acknowledgements	146
11.9 References	146
12. Optimizing Fertilizer Use within the Context of Integrated Soil Fertility Management in Nigeria	148
12.1 Introduction.....	148
12.2 Agricultural systems of Nigeria.....	149
12.3 Traditional practices affecting soil fertility	151
12.4 Fertilizer use and recommendations	151
12.5 Diagnostic results for the Northern Guinea Savanna AEZ.....	152
12.6 Optimizing fertilizer use in the savanna biome of Nigeria.....	153
12.7 Fertilizer optimization tools for Nigerian AEZ	154
12.7.1 The Excel Fertilizer Optimization Tool	154
12.7.2 Paper fertilizer optimization tools	157
12.7.3 Fertilizer use in an integrated soil fertility management context	159
12.8 Targeted crops by AEZ	159
12.9 Acknowledgements	162
12.10 References.....	162
13. Optimizing Fertilizer Use within the Context of Integrated Soil Fertility Management in Rwanda	164
13.1 Agricultural systems of Rwanda.....	164
13.2 Soil fertility management in Rwanda.....	165
13.3 Diagnosis of nutrient deficiencies in Rwanda.....	166
13.4 Optimizing fertilizer use in Rwanda.....	167
13.5 Fertilizer use optimization tools for AEZ of Rwanda.....	169
13.6 Crop nutrient response functions by AEZ in Rwanda	173
13.7 Conclusion	175
13.8 Acknowledgements	175
13.9 References	175
14. Optimizing Fertilizer Use within the Context of Integrated Soil Fertility Management in Tanzania	176
14.1 Importance of agriculture in Tanzania	176
14.2 Agro-ecological zones (AEZ) of Tanzania.....	176
14.3 Current soil fertility management.....	178
14.4 Diagnosis of nutrient deficiencies in Tanzania	180
14.5 Optimizing fertilizer use in Tanzania	180
14.6 Fertilizer use optimization tools (FOTs) for Tanzania	182
14.7 Adjusting fertilizer rates for other practices and soil test information	185
14.8 Targeted crops and cropping systems by AEZ.....	186

14.9 Conclusion	189
14.10 Acknowledgements	191
14.11 References	191
15. Optimizing Fertilizer Use within the Context of Integrated Soil Fertility in Uganda	193
15.1 Agro-ecological zones (AEZ) of Uganda	193
15.2 Current soil fertility management.....	197
15.3 Diagnosis of nutrient deficiencies in Uganda.....	198
15.4 Optimizing fertilizer use in Uganda.....	199
15.5 Targeted crops by AEZ	204
15.6 Conclusion	205
15.7 Acknowledgements	209
15.8 References	209
16. Optimizing Fertilizer Use within the Context of Integrated Soil Fertility Management in Zambia	210
16.1 Introduction.....	210
16.2 Agricultural systems of Zambia	210
16.3 Current soil fertility management.....	212
16.4 Fertilizer use optimization	212
16.5 Fertilizer optimization tools for Zambia	214
16.6 Fertilizer use in an integrated nutrient management framework	216
16.7 Crops addressed by region for optimized fertilizer use	216
16.8 Acknowledgements	219
16.9 References	219
17. Enabling Fertilizer Use Optimization in Sub-Saharan Africa	220
17.1 Introduction	220
17.2 Enabling fertilizer use optimization by farmers	220
17.3 Creating demand for fertilizer use optimization	222
17.4 Training farmer advisors on fertilizer use optimization.....	223
17.5 Lessons learned.....	223
17.6 Conclusion	224
17.7 Acknowledgements	224
17.8 References	224
List of Abbreviations.....	225
List of Crops and Other Plants with Scientific Names	227

Foreword

Low soil fertility costs Africa's farmers US\$4 billion a year in reduced yields. This usually results in low incomes and poor livelihoods. Part of the problem is that fertilizer use in the continent is only about 12 kg/ha/yr.

Africa's smallholder farmers are mostly very poor and have little financial ability to invest in inputs such as fertilizer. However, they are generally responsive to perceived high profit opportunities with little risk. The key to increased fertilizer use is to improve the profitability of its use with little risk. Achieving this gives farmers the opportunity to reduce the severity of their financial constraints and to gradually improve their crop management.

Fertilizer recommendations are available for some crops in most African countries, but too often these are decades-old blanket recommendations that cover large regions or even whole countries, are not well supported by field research and are more oriented to achieving high yields rather than high farmer profits.

The AGRA-funded project 'Developing and fine-tuning fertilizer recommendations within an integrated soil fertility management framework', abbreviated as the Optimizing Fertilizer Recommendations in Africa (OFRA), was implemented to develop the basis for fertilizer use optimization, that is, more profitable fertilizer use.

Through OFRA, national research institutes of 13 sub-Saharan African countries partnered together, and with CABI and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, to develop the field research-based information needed for fertilizer use optimization decisions. Results of past research and OFRA-supported research were compiled and systematically analysed. This was applied to determine crop nutrient response functions for the important food crops in each of 67 agro-ecological zones (AEZ) or recommendation domains across the 13 countries. When several response functions for an AEZ are considered, it becomes apparent that profit potential varies according to which nutrient is applied to which crop and the rate of application. Therefore, especially for financially constrained farmers, the crop-nutrient-rate choices are very important to

maximizing profitability. The choice of fertilizer types may include blends but maximizing profit potential requires adequate availability of single- (such as urea and triple superphosphate) and multi-nutrient, compound fertilizers (such as diammonium phosphate and potassium chloride).

Country teams integrated the crop nutrient response functions into decision tools that use linear programming to determine recommendations specific to a farmer's context intended to maximize profit from fertilizer use (see Chapter 1 and country chapters 4-16). These decision tools are called OFRA Fertilizer Optimization Tools (FOT); computer versions are available and also paper versions for use when a computer is not available. The FOT considers the farmer's financial ability, choice of crops and land allocation, crop values and fertilizer costs to determine the crop-nutrient-rate choices expected to maximize farmer profit from fertilizer use.

Sharing of research results across countries was enhanced with the development of the GIS tool called the OFRA Inference Tool. This tool uses GIS layers for soil properties of Africa Soil Information Service (AfSIS) and climatic properties, elevation, latitude and crops of HarvestChoice in geo-transfer of research results within and across countries between areas of similar growing conditions (see Chapter 2).

Fertilizer use optimization is within the framework of integrated soil fertility management with recommended fertilizer rates adjusted according to soil property information and the use of complementary practices (see Chapter 3).

Much early progress in enabling fertilizer use optimization with farmers and their advisors has been made, but this still requires a tremendous effort with much stakeholder support. Many more government and non-government extension staff and input retailers need to be trained in advising farmers in fertilizer use optimization. Farmers need training in the use of the paper FOTs to make fertilizer use choices according to the 4Rs (right type, rate, time and method of nutrient application) of nutrient stewardship and with proper calibration of

application). Extension training resources have been developed and applied and many advisors have been trained. This is addressed in Chapter 17 with lessons learned for more effective progress in the future.

AGRA is delighted with the success of the OFRA partnership of 13 countries in 1) developing a strong database of crop nutrient responses while recognizing that more research is needed to address secondary and micro nutrients, intercropping and rotations, and otherwise fine-tuning existing information,

2) providing computer and paper FOTs for 67 recommendation domains, 3) effectively applying GIS in sharing research results across recommendation domains and countries, 4) capturing in the 17 chapters of this book a great deal of information applicable to fertilizer use optimization within integrated soil fertility management framework, and 5) training many extension staff and other stakeholders, realizing that much more of this is needed to achieve fertilizer use optimization throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

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