Feeding the Future

Oct. 16, 2015

Fertilizer News, Nutrient Stewardship

I am continually pointing out that feeding a growing population will require enhanced efficiency in agriculture. Of course, a key component in meeting this challenge is the use of fertilizer in a sustainable agricultural system based on the 4R’s of nutrient stewardship (use of the right nutrient source at the right time, the right rate and in the right place). Through this, farmers can meet environmental, economic and social goals.

A recent editorial in the Washington Post focused on the global food production challenge but unfortunately failed to mention fertilizer, so I was compelled to write. The text of my letter can be found below. Once you have read it, I welcome your comments in the section below.

Dear Washington Post Editorial Page Editors:

We were pleased to see that growing efficiencies in agriculture as the focus of your December 5 editorial (“Feeding the Future”). Growing enough food to meet the demands of an increasing world population, while protecting the environment is truly a daunting challenge for the world’s agricultural community. Beyond biotech, the efficient and environmentally sound use of all nutrients, including commercial fertilizers, will be crucial.

Here in the United States, farmers nearly doubled corn production in 2010 using slightly fewer fertilizer nutrients than were used in 1980. In 1980, farmers grew 6.64 billion bushels of corn using 3.2 pounds of nutrients (nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium) for each bushel and in 2010 they grew 12.45 billion bushels using 1.6 pounds of nutrients per bushel produced. In total, this represents an 87.5 percent increase in production with 4 percent fewer nutrients during that same timeframe. By growing more food on less land, farmers are also reducing their environmental impact.

Facilitating similar efficiencies through the more widespread adoption of 4R nutrient stewardship, (use of the right fertilizer source at the right rate, right time and right place) in the developing world are central
to the fertilizer industry’s strategy. To that end, the industry funds a global network of agronomists who are working on a daily basis to assist in this mission. As a result of this effort, farmers in Africa, India, South and Central America are learning how to increase food production while preserving land and water resources.

Sincerely yours,

Ford West
President, The Fertilizer Institute