

# Consider autumn N carefully

By TOM J. BECHMAN

**T**ED Salsbery, Tipton, Ind., applied 140 pounds of nitrogen in one field last fall. He didn't use N stabilizer. Then after the super-wet spring, he added extra N.

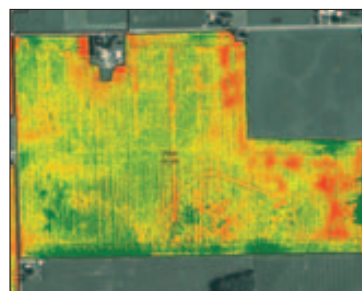
Salsbery used a high-clearance sprayer to apply up to 90 pounds per

## Key Points

- Wet spring made for tough year where nitrogen was fall-applied.
- Some farmers rescued fall-applied fields by adding more N.
- Extension specialist advises against fall N applications when possible.

acre of additional N. He varied the rate, depending upon yield potential. To see if it paid or not, he skipped one pass.

Justin Welch, Frankfort, Ind., agronomist for Co-Alliance, picked out which pass Salsbery skipped while viewing an infrared photo shot in mid-August. Salsbery enrolled in a scouting program offered by Co-Alliance.



**PROOF POSITIVE:** Notice the red strip (right of center) running across the field. Extra N was added to the rest of the field, but that pass was skipped for comparison purposes.

"We offered three images, with the last one in August," Welch says.

What the August photo of Salsbery's field showed was a distinct difference in vegetative cover between that one pass and the field. "We didn't know for sure why there was a difference until we went into the field," Welch says. "We confirmed that pass was short on N."

## Nitrogen numbers

Should adding extra N always pay if you determine you're short on N early enough to make a difference? Here's an example.

Suppose you applied an extra 90 pounds of actual N. At 60 cents per pound, that's \$54, plus application cost, say \$6 per acre. That's a \$60 investment. At \$5-per-bushel corn, you need 12 more bushels per acre to break even.

Is that reasonable? Dave Nanda thinks so. Yield difference between fields that ran out of gas and those that didn't could far exceed 12 bushels per acre. Nanda is a longtime plant breeder who consults for *Prairie Farmer's* Corn Illustrated section.

Suppose you only applied 50 pounds more N, but picked up 10 bushels per acre. N cost (applied) becomes \$36 per acre vs. \$50 per acre more revenue. That's \$14 per acre more profit, or \$1,400 over 100 acres.

## Fall N tips

"We generally recommend avoiding fall N application if at all possible," emphasizes Jim Camberato, Purdue University Extension soil fertility specialist. "Our data shows that, on average, you're going to lose 15% if you use a N stabilizer and 30% if you don't use one."

The last two seasons were different for fall N.

During the 2006-07 winter, soil temperatures stayed near 45 degrees F for two months. N conversion and loss continued. But a dry '07 spring prevented major losses.

Last winter was cooler — a good thing — but the spring was extremely wet. N losses for N applied in fall '07 were likely above average.

"People once upped rates for fall, but as more now apply optimal rates initially, there's less cushion for losses," he notes. "Besides, there's no way to know what's left by spring, so you either worry or apply more N anyway."

If you still choose to apply fall N, then wait until soil temperatures are less than 50 degrees, trending toward freezing. Farmers in the southern third of Indiana should avoid fall applications, period.



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