



Agronomy Notes

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Mid Season Nitrogen Fertility Management in Wheat and Barley

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The total nitrogen recovered by a wheat crop in season can range from 60 to 250 lbs N/A depending on the final grain yield. A high yielding and high protein wheat crop (3-3.5 tons/A above 13 % protein) will require about 150 to 225 lbs/A of applied nitrogen in a season. Residual nitrogen in the soil from previous crops will provide the difference between the nitrogen provided with fertilizers and the nitrogen which is recovered by the crop. Barley will require less applied nitrogen than wheat (about 125 lbs N/A) in a season because it is lower yielding and grain protein is not a concern.

A good guideline is to have at least one-half, but no more than two-thirds, of the seasonal nitrogen fertilizer requirement applied preplant to establish a vigorous crop with maximum yield potential. The remainder of the nitrogen fertilizer requirement should be supplied with one or two supplemental nitrogen applications during the crop season. The timing of the first post plant N applications should occur during tillering before the wheat starts elongating. The second postplant N application for increasing wheat quality should occur between boot and flowering. Barley or oats do not require an N fertilizer application after the boot stage.

Nitrogen fertilizers for increased yield are most effective during tillering, but are also effective in the jointing stage. Nitrogen applied after boot stage will have a minimal effect on grain yield (at most a 200 to 300 lbs/A yield increase due to plumper kernels and higher bushel weight), but will increase grain protein. Rates of 30 to 50 lbs N/A topdressed, followed by significant rainfall (0.5 inches) or irrigation should be sufficient. Water run applications should be limited to 25 to 30 lbs N/A to minimize volatilization of the fertilizer.

The use of stem nitrate-nitrogen tissue tests is an effective way to monitor the nitrogen status of a wheat or barley crop. Table 2 provides critical stem $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ levels for wheat and barley as the crop develops from the third and fourth leaf stages up to the early boot stage (late March to early April). This test is not effective for managing late season N fertility in wheat after heading when the goal is to produce high grain protein.

Proper tissue sampling procedures are necessary to attain a valid and informative analysis. Collect 20 to 40 stems at random from the field in question. Cut off the roots and plant tops and send the bottom 1 to 2 inches of each stem to an agricultural laboratory for analysis. Be certain the stem tissue sample is not contaminated with soil or old leaves. Submit the tissue sample the same day that it has been collected.

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Table 2: Wheat and barley stem NO₃-N analysis critical levels during vegetative growth

Growth Stage	Approx. Date	Deficient Level	Desired Range	Excessive Zone
3-4 leaf	Jan. 25	<7,000	7,000-12,000	>12,000
Tillering	Feb. 1 - March 5	<6,000	6,000-11,000	>11,000
Jointing	March 5 - March 25	<5,000	5,000-10,000	>10,000
Boot	March 25 - April 1	<4,000	4,000-9,000	>9,000

Choice of fertilizer material used to manage a crop will depend on the current weather conditions, weather forecasts, and costs. In the cooler and wetter areas, like the Sacramento Valley, ammonium sulfate (21-0-0 24S) may be the preferred form of nitrogen fertilizer. Plants growing in cool wet soils do not utilize sulfur as readily as in dry warm soils. Also, lighter textured soils have less available sulfur and wheat may benefit from additional sulfur applied in the spring. Urea (46-0-0) is the highest analysis and usually the cheapest form of dry fertilizer. Either ammonium sulfate or urea are effective forms of nitrogen when broadcast and followed by at least 0.5 inches of rain within 5 days after application. Urea must be converted to nitrate nitrogen by soil microorganisms, so it is released over a longer period of time and thus, less prone to leaching from the root zone. However, the urea form of nitrogen is relatively unstable once it has been broadcast; volatilization losses can occur.

Water run applications of nitrogen can be useful for nitrogen fertility. Anhydrous ammonia (82-0-0), UAN-32 (32-0-0), and aqua ammonia (20-0-0) are the primary fertilizers used for this purpose. Anhydrous ammonia is most economical because of its higher analysis. However, UAN-32 is more easily handled and the nitrate component in UAN-32 is readily available to the crop.

A final alternative to supply N to the crop is aerial applications of UAN-32 or foliar urea. Tank mixes of UAN-32 with MCPA and other herbicides are effective means of applying both herbicides and nitrogen. Nitrogen rates should be limited to less than 25 lbs N/A. If aerial applications of UAN-32 are applied when air temperatures exceed 80 ° F, considerable leaf burn and some yield loss is likely.

Nitrogen Management and Grain Protein

Wheat grown for bread-type end uses will likely require one more application of nitrogen fertilizer after heading to ensure high grain protein. Several years of trials throughout the Central Valley in the 1980's showed late applications of nitrogen after heading increased grain protein 1-2 percent and contributed to 150 to 300 lbs/A more yield due to higher kernel weight.

The N application should be applied after heading. A fairly wide window (about 3 weeks) of opportunity exists for the N application ranging from just after the grain heads have elongated from the flag leaf sheath to about 2 weeks after flowering. These stages normally occur in early to mid April for December plantings.

Appropriate late season N rates may range from 20 to 50 lbs N/A. Lower N rates are appropriate for lower yielding crops (2-3 tons/A) and higher N rates are best suited for yields above 3 tons/A. Sufficient grain protein may be attained without a late season N application if wheat yields are less than 2 tons/A, if preplant fertilizers and topdress applications were applied during the vegetative growth stages. Generally, cool and dry weather during grain filling will result in higher grain yields and nitrogen management for protein will be more critical.

Nitrogen fertilizer trials have shown application of N near the boot stage (before heading), which should occur between mid to late March for December plantings, will also elevate grain protein. Typically, the increase in grain protein is about 0.5-1.0 %. The grain protein increase with N applied at boot stage is not as large as the response when applied at flowering (1-2 % increase). The smaller effect on grain protein with an N application at boot stage is attributed to two factors: 1) the boot stage N application may also result in a yield response of 500 to 1000 lbs/A which means more grain is produced and requires more N in the grain to attain suitable protein levels; and 2) the wheat plant is more efficient at partitioning the nitrogen to the grain after heading than at boot stage (before heading).

Water run applications of ammonia or UAN-32, or urea topdressed just before a rain/irrigation, are the preferred materials and methods for late season fertilization. Topdressing ammonium nitrate just before an irrigation is another option, but it is less desirable since it is less effective in raising grain protein.

Determining Irrigation Cutoff

Studies conducted in 1985 and 1986 at the UC Westside Research and Extension Station near Five Points and related studies conducted in Kings County in 1987 through 1989 revealed that the primary dry matter and nitrogen accumulation in wheat was completed between 28-32 days after flowering for Yecora Rojo wheat. This corresponded to about the last 10 days of April and the first three weeks in May.

The amount of crop water consumption corresponding to this critical 30-36 day period of grain filling (depending on wheat variety) averages about 7 inches. It will range from 6-8 inches depending on weather conditions as well.

Timing the final irrigation is critical. Sufficient moisture must be available from the last irrigation to carry the crop through hard dough (the end of dry matter accumulation). However, too much irrigation or rain resulting in additional soil moisture beyond hard dough stage is wasted and may be detrimental to the crop. Lodging and black point are more likely to occur in wheat that is irrigated too late into the season. Late irrigations can also result in soil being too wet for effective deep ripping.

There is a wide range in appropriate irrigation cutoff dates depending on the soil water holding capacity and crop root zone depth. Fine textured clay soils with high water holding capacities and deeper root systems may receive their final irrigation in late April to early May. In contrast, coarse sandy soils tend to have shallower root systems and have lower water holding capacities. As a result the final irrigation may occur as late as the second or third week in May.



What about Stripe Rust?

This year the weather conditions have been conducive to the development of stripe rust. Several PCA's have reported finding stripe rust in fields of known susceptible varieties such as Summit and Blanca Grande. What about the other varieties that were resistant last year such as CalRojo and Espresso? ----It's still too early to tell if the resistance will hold up to this year's races of the stripe rust pathogen, but, so far, so good! We haven't gotten any reports of stripe rust developing on the latest resistant varieties. But that can change rapidly as we have seen in years past. Continue to scout for stripe rust, even in the resistant varieties. If you discover stripe rust in a resistant variety, please contact your UC Farm Advisor.