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Why soil test a pasture?

I chatted last week with Dr. Tina Sullivan, the new northeast area agronomist with K-State Research and Extension, about soil testing and application timing in pastures.

Dr. Sullivan discussed how pasture managers should prioritize taking the time to get a soil sample pulled and analyzed. “Seeing what our phosphorus, potassium (P and K levels) and then our pH is for our pastures is, even if it is a pasture situation compared to a tame forage, we still need to know what those levels are in order to keep our pastures as productive as possible to support the livestock we are trying to raise off of them. As we kind of think about forages as a whole, especially of pastures, we want to support those livestock that are on it, but if we’re not supporting our forages by providing them the nutrients that they need through N, P, and K applications, then the forage can’t be as productive thus our livestock can’t be as productive.”

When discussing the timing of fertilizer applications, Dr. Sullivan recommends applying it during the correct season. After reviewing the soil test results, decide where the most limiting factors might be as far as soil nutrients, and then apply those nutrients at the right time of the year to get the most cost-effective use of that application. “We like to apply our lime products, for changing our pH, phosphorus, and potassium products in the fall. Those products take longer to interact with the soil so our plants can uptake them. Whereas when it comes to nitrogen, we want to apply that product when the forage is greening up. Nitrogen can leach through and we don’t want to lose that precious product we’re applying,” says Dr. Sullivan.

We also talked about grazing livestock and how those little piles of nutrients can be calculated into a fertility program. Manure sampling is a topic for the conversation!

To learn more about pasture fertility, plan to attend the pasture soil health field day on March 25th at the K-State Southeast Research and Extension Center. We’ll discuss soil amendments and tools for forage management and feature a panel of experts.

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