

Beware snake oil fertilizers

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Something about high fertilizer prices brings the snake oil salesmen out of the woodwork looking for a quick dollar from folks trying to reduce the cost of raising crops.

"My mother always told me that if it looked too good to be true, it was," said Vanessa Corriher, Texas AgriLife Extension forage specialist, speaking during the annual Agricultural Technology Conference on the Texas A&M-Commerce campus.

She and soil fertility specialist Mark McFarland took on what they charitably referred to as "alternative fertilizers," and pointed to research data that show no economic benefit from some non-traditional nutrient formulations. Those do not include animal manures and legumes, which can augment a conventional fertility program, they said.

"A lot of these products are promoted heavily," McFarland said. "Some, such as Medina, have been around a long time and have been studied."

He said Medina is supposed to "rev up soil microbes." But results from multiple state testing over seven years showed improvement in crop production was "zero. It's still here and with new formulations," he said.

Other products, including humic acids that are supposed to change soil chemistry and improve nutrient uptake are equally unimpressive. "Humic acid occurs naturally in the soil," he said. A three-year study on four crops showed "no economic response."

He singled out Avail, promoted as a "pro-terminator" that would produce equal yields with about 25 percent the standard Phosphorus fertilizer rate. "The product did fine," McFarland said, in North Carolina tests. "But it costs the same amount per acre (as the standard fertilizer rate)." He said reliance on the material would result in "mining the soil" of nutrients. Eventually, producers have to add more phosphorus.

"These products have appealing sticker price tags," Corriher said, "but the economics may not add up."

She recommended trying no more than a small amount on limited acreage to evaluate a product. "Traditional fertilizers produce the best yields," she said. "We see a significant difference between traditional fertilizers and

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Research has shown average yields with the "alternative products" at 900 pounds of forage per acre compared to 3,200 pounds per acre with traditional fertilizers. "We see little difference between these products and untreated check plots," she said.

McFarland recommends producers ask for more information before using these "miracle" products. "Insist on scientific research from a credible source," he said. He said an Internet search might not provide reliable information. "The first few sites will be marketing sites," he said.

"Request local data and conduct your own scientific tests over a uniform area, multiple plots with and without the product. Replication is a key."

He said plots should all be managed and harvested similarly.