

# New cotton nutrition sampling guidelines

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**M**onitoring of soil and plant nutrient status is highly recommended on a field by field basis to manage soil productivity and to avoid nutritional stress of cotton crops as well as identifying soil problems that could limit production. But interpretation of soil or plant tissue analyses is often difficult due to confusion about sampling methodologies or locations as well as testing laboratories, which leads to variable results.

The following information has been put together in an effort to provide some standardisation across the cotton industry and may assist with improving sampling to minimise some of this variability.

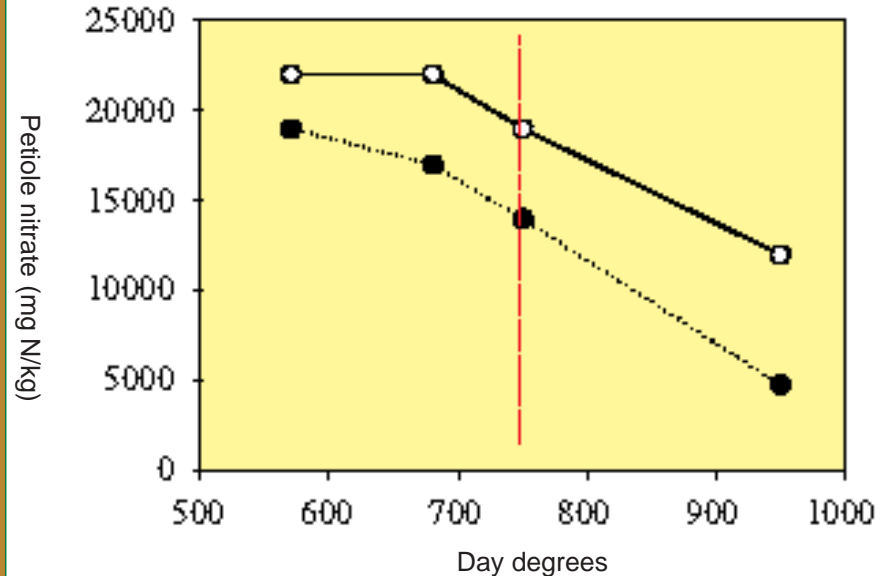
## SOIL ANALYSES

Monitoring changes in soil nutrient concentration over time is just as valuable a use for soil testing as using test results to predict fertiliser application rates. But soil testing for macronutrients such as nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and sulphur can assist in determining fertiliser strategies as the relationship between soil test concentration and plant response is more clearly defined for these nutrients.



Soil corer mounted on a ute.

**FIGURE 1: Petiole nitrate decline over the season**



It is recommended that, in both cases, the same soil collection sites be sampled over subsequent years to identify changes/trends. Sites can be identified with global positioning systems (GPS).

### Timing

Soil sampling is best done May to August in fallow soil or at least a couple of weeks before fertiliser application in back-to-back crops.

### Depth

Sampling 0-30 cm is ideal for all nutrients, particularly N, P and K and salinity and sodicity indicators.

Sample subsoil (30-100 cm) for sodicity, salinity, nitrate and chloride approximately every five years.

### Where to sample

Ideally sample in the same place over subsequent years. Sample close to the plant line or the middle of the bed. However, it is important to avoid sampling fertiliser bands especially where phosphorus, zinc or potassium have been applied. To sample where immobile nutrients have been banded:

- Sample after full disturbance operations (laser levelling) and a period of wetting and drying to allow soil nutrients to reach equilibrium.

- Sample top 30 cm in transverse section across the whole bed and mix thoroughly. Mixing and sub sampling is critical.
- Take a core sample through the centre of the fertiliser band. Dilute this with samples from outside the fertiliser band. The number of cores outside the band will be the row width by 0.262.

### Number/distribution of cores

Depends on field uniformity. The more variable the field the more samples required. Field information such as yield maps, biomass images, soil chemistry and electromagnetic induction (EM) surveys used in geographic information systems (GIS) can help identify in-field variation. Depending on the variability revealed sampling may be:

- Location that represents the average of the field;
- Location that represent the highest or lowest yielding areas;
- Area that has the greatest or least yield stability from year to year;
- Particular soil characteristics.

### Sampling tool

Corer of 50mm steel tubing with reduced diameter at the bottom and drilled holes at the top for a handle allows for quick sampling to 30cm. Mechanised

sampling equipment is required for deeper sampling.

### Sample handling and storage

Most of the soil processes that affect nutrient availability are in some way related to soil water content and temperature. To ensure that a soil sample truly reflects the soil nutrient concentration in the field at the time of sampling, these processes need to be controlled by modifying moisture or temperature conditions.

After collection, samples should be either cooled (below 4°C) or dried (48 hours at 50°C) to stop these processes that could change the nutrient status of the soil sample.

Cooling samples to 4°C and ensuring they are at the laboratory within 48 hours of collection is unlikely to significantly alter recommendations that may arise from the sample. If samples require storage for extended periods then oven drying or freezing are the most appropriate methods of sample storage.

### Limitations

Soil analysis only gives a general indication of the status of micronutrients such as copper, zinc, iron, manganese and boron. Often, there is no strong relationship between a soil test result and an application rate for micronutrients. At best, the lower the concentration of the micronutrient below a critical value the more likely you are to see a response to the application of fertiliser.

Micronutrients are more accurately assessed by analysis of leaf blades, as the concentrations are many times higher in plant tissue than soil and thus, easier to detect. Concentrations within the leaf blade therefore indicate the availability of the plant to take up nutrients.

### PETIOLE ANALYSES

In Australia, petiole tests have calibrations for nitrate and potassium but are not currently recommended for other nutrients. Of the other nutrients, petioles normally contain about half of the concentrations found in the leaf blade, but this varies, making them less reliable as a sampling tool.

Petioles are ideal for monitoring nitrate-N and potassium concentrations up to flowering. Petiole nitrate-N level declines with time (Figure 1). By flowering, petiole nitrate-N levels are usually declining and it is easy to distinguish between crops having sufficient or insufficient N. Beyond flowering leaf tissue tests are a better method of monitoring crop nutrition.

For nitrate monitoring, three samplings, approximately 10 days apart, give a good indication of the rate of change in nitrate-N in the petioles. Sampling is best done at approximately 600, 750 and 900 day degrees from sowing. When collecting petioles, leaf blades must be removed immediately in the field to prevent the transfer of nutrient from the petiole to the leaf blade.

### Leaf tissue analyses

The leaf blade can be used to monitor all nutrients including micronutrients. Sampling twice (at flowering and cut out) produces the most useful information. Leaf tissue tests can be used for identifying

nutrient imbalances, deficiencies and toxicities and can do so more precisely than soil testing and assist in optimising fertiliser programs.

### Limitations

Weather can be an important factor in petiole and leaf tissue testing. Waterlogging, cold weather, low radiation through cloudy conditions all affect nutrient levels. Petioles can be collected up to mid morning but any later and water stress can influence the results. In cotton there is generally no direct relationship between plant tissue concentration and rate of application. Therefore any action required

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where nutrient concentrations are above or below the sufficiency range needs to be sought from an experienced advisor.

### Plant tissue storage and handling

To avoid contamination of samples during collection it is recommended that hands be thoroughly washed with soap and dried or gloves are worn. Common contaminants include salt from sweat and zinc contained in many sunscreen products. Ensure that collection and transport containers have not been contaminated.

Collect approximately 50 petioles (more if they are thin and short) or 50 leaf blades from the fifth topmost leaf. Individual laboratory services may specify the number of petioles/leaf blades they want collected. Petiole and leaf blade samples should be stored in an absorbent bag and kept cool.

Samples need to arrive at the laboratory ASAP and in good condition. Samples not likely to reach the laboratory the day after they were collected should be dried prior to transport. This is best done at low temperature (less than 70°C) in a convection oven or quickly air dried. Microwave ovens are not suitable.

### Laboratory selection

Much of the lack of confidence in soil and tissue nutrient analyses is due to the variability in results from laboratories. The choice of laboratory for soil and plant tissue testing is very important. Some

points to consider when selecting a laboratory are:

- The laboratory should use standardised accepted laboratory methods. This increases the accuracy of interpretation as it is more likely that critical concentrations and calibrations will have been generated locally to reflect Australian conditions/situations. The specific laboratory methods for nutrient soil analysis suggested for the Australian cotton industry are listed in NUTRIpak.
- It is recommended that the laboratory selected be involved in an accredited laboratory proficiency program and that you request that the laboratory disclose its laboratory proficiency rating.
- Laboratories striving for best practice will generally have an externally audited quality assurance program for each analysis.

In summary, in order of preference, the laboratory selected should provide:

1. Australian standard methods, involved in Proficiency Program performance and results available, external audited Quality Assurance, quality result reporting structure, guidelines for sampling and sample handling.

2. Australian standard methods, involved in Proficiency Program performance and results available, internal audited Quality Assurance, quality result reporting structure, guidelines for sampling and sample handling.

3. Australian standard methods, involved in Proficiency Program perfor-

mance results not available, external audited Quality Assurance, quality result reporting structure, guidelines for sampling and sample handling.

4. Australian standard methods, involved in Proficiency Program performance and results not available, internal audited Quality Assurance, quality result reporting structure, guidelines for sampling and sample handling.

5. Australian standard methods, involved in Proficiency Program performance and results not available, internal audited Quality Assurance, quality result reporting structure.

6. Australian standard methods, involved in Proficiency Program performance and results not available, internal audited Quality Assurance.

With increasing yield potential, aging soils, decreasing water availability, the profitability squeeze and continual environmental scrutiny, optimising nutrition programs is important. Effective, well planned soil and plant analysis have a vital role in each of these areas that determine the long term viability of the cotton industry.

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