

NITROGEN FERTILIZER FOR SOYBEANS

There is the theory that N (Nitrogen) fixation and soil residual N may not supply enough N for soybeans to maximize seed yield, especially during reproductive development when they are grown in high-yield environments.

Nebraska scientists, in a [2008 review](#) of the results from a large number of studies conducted over a wide range of locations and a [high-yield study conducted in Nebraska](#), reported the following.

- Soybeans produced an average of 12.7 lb of seed per lb of N uptake. Thus, a soybean crop that yields 75 bu/acre assimilates an average of about 355 lb of N in the aboveground portion of the plant. This translates to an average of about 4.75 lb of N assimilated per bushel of seed produced.
- The concentration of N in soybean seed averaged 6.34%, or 3.3 lb (dry weight basis) of N/bu of seed produced. Thus, a 60 bu/acre seed yield will remove about 200 lb of N/acre from a field site, while an 80 bu/acre seed yield will remove about 265 lb of N/acre. The N that is in the vegetative portion of the plant is assumed to stay on the field.
- N₂ fixation accounted for an average of 50–60% of the N in soybeans, with the remainder coming from nitrate and ammonium N in the soil.
- The proportion of fixed N decreased with the addition of fertilizer N. Thus, they are not additive in their effect on yield. In fact, the decline in N₂ fixation with N fertilizer addition is exponential; e.g., if 90 and 270 lb N/acre (3x increase) are applied as fertilizer in

the upper 20 cm of soil or on the soil surface, maximum N₂ fixation would be expected to be 115 and 15 lb N/acre (7.5x decline), respectively.

- The maximum amount of N₂ that can be fixed was considered to be 300 lb/acre in the absence of N fertilizer. Using the above 4.75 lb of N assimilated per bu of soybean seed produced gives a maximum potential yield of about 63 bu/acre from fixed N alone.
- In a high-yield experiment in Nebraska, a 74.4 bu/acre average yield (13% moisture) removed an average of 246 lb N/acre in the grain on a dry weight basis from the field site, or an average of 3.3 lb of N removed with each bushel of seed. This compares to the removal of 138 lb N/acre with an average yield of 40 bu/acre in the cited studies, or an average of 3.45 lb N removed with each bushel of seed. These values are similar.
- The average yield increase from the addition of N fertilizer in the cited studies was 7.7 bu/acre, and did not differ among N rate categories of < 45 lb/acre, 45–90 lb/acre, and > 90 lb/acre.

Research in several states has been and is being conducted to address the following scenarios.

N fertilizer applied to replace fixed N

A study in [Mississippi](#) evaluated applying a high rate of N fertilizer (>260 lb N/acre) that was deemed sufficient to replace or supplant N fixation. Yields were increased by 4.8 and 6.5 bu/acre above those obtained from soybeans receiving no N fertilizer in irrigated and

nonirrigated studies, respectively. However, the increases were not profitable. These results indicate that N fixation is not sufficient to maximize seed yield, but replacing fixed N with N fertilizer is unprofitable.

Starter N Fertilizer

Normal-time (April-May) plantings

Research in [Mississippi](#) (30 lb N/acre) and [Missouri](#) (25 lb N/acre) showed that starter N fertilizer either provided no yield increase or an increase that did not cover the cost of the fertilizer (this research was conducted before today's high soybean commodity price). Thus, net returns were lowered in all cases.

Late plantings (June and July)

- In two Alabama studies, starter N fertilizer (~45 lb N/acre) was applied to soybeans planted at a time that mimics those planted as a doublecrop in the midsouthern US. All sites had low residual soil N (generally less than 50 to 70 lb N/acre). Yield increases (~2.2 bu/acre) [in one study](#) did not increase profits, whereas yield increases (~7.5 bu/acre) in [a second study](#) increased profits over \$30/acre (\$6/bu commodity price and \$0.40/lb N cost).
- The [Kansas Soybean Production Handbook](#) states that soybeans planted into large amounts of wheat straw may respond to small amounts (10 to 20 lb N/acre) of starter N fertilizer because soil N is temporarily immobilized by soil microorganisms decomposing the wheat straw.

N fertilizer applied during reproductive (R3 to R4) development.

- Results from irrigated [Delaware](#) studies that included both full-season and doublecropped soybeans showed that the application of N fertilizer at rates of 25 and 50 lb N/acre from R2 to R4 did not increase yield.
- Results from [Kansas](#) (irrigated) and [Missouri](#) (some irrigated) studies show mixed results from this practice. Results from Missouri (25 lb N/acre) showed no yield increase and thus decreased profits. The Kansas (20 lb N/acre) results showed an average yield increase of 7 bu/acre (~12% yield increase) where yields ranged from 56 to 83 bu/acre. Most of the Kansas study sites had low residual soil N.
- Results from [Minnesota](#) (75 lb N/acre) studies showed that in-season N fertilizer applied from R2 to R4 did not improve seed yield compared to unfertilized plots. Most of the Minnesota study sites had >3% organic matter.
- Results from an [Iowa](#) study (organic matter >3.5%) showed no yield increase from 40 and 80 lb N/acre applied at R3. Yields were >50 bu/acre.
- In an irrigated [Illinois](#) study, N applied to soybeans at 20 and 40 lb/acre at R3 generally increased yields by no more than 2 bu/acre, and there was no indication to predict if and when yield increases would occur. The authors concluded that the likelihood of a favorable yield response to this practice is low.

Summary

- **Soybeans planted in a normal timeframe (April-May) do not respond profitably to application of preplant or “starter” N fertilizer.**
- In late plantings, and especially those following a small grain, applying preplant N fertilizer at <50 lb N/acre **may** increase soybean yields and profits at sites with low residual soil N. **This should be verified each season using current commodity and N prices, plus measured soil N.**
- Producers desiring to maximize yields from irrigated plantings on soils with low residual soil N (< 50 lb/acre) should consider applying 20 to 25 lb N/acre at beginning podset to ensure that N deficiency does not limit yields in these high-yield (> 55 bu/acre) environments. A key point with this option is to irrigate following surface N fertilizer application to ensure immediate uptake.

Additional points

- Adding starter (early-season) N fertilizer to soybeans may delay or impede nodulation, and thus can delay the onset of N fixation that normally would have occurred in the absence of the starter N (see next point).
- Results from a [Nebraska](#) study provide evidence that adding N fertilizer to soybeans before planting may be beneficial in high yield environments if the N is placed in the soil below the nodulation zone, or deeper than about 8 inches. This will significantly mitigate the N fertilizer-induced reduction in bacterial N fixation compared to that resulting from N applied on the soil surface or in the

nodulation zone.

- Soybean plants growing under moisture deficit conditions may appear N-deficient, but in fact the lack of water has suppressed N fixation and this will not be remedied by application of N fertilizer.
- It is not possible to predict soybean response to N fertilizer based on soil properties. However, situations with positive responses generally have either very low residual soil N, low N mineralization capability, or soil pH so low that it inhibits nodulation and N fixation. As stated above, a measure of residual soil N is necessary for making a truly informed decision about adding N to soybeans.
- The above results are from studies that were conducted before the advent of today’s high commodity prices. Thus, economic results with today’s prices may be different than those cited above.
- One of the environmental strong points of growing any legume crop is not having to add supplemental N fertilizer. Therefore, this should be considered if and when this practice is found to be a key point in reaching a higher soybean yield plateau since loss of N from cropland is a significant concern in [USDA/NRCS’s conservation practice standard for nutrient management](#).

FINAL THOUGHTS

All of the above cited results indicate that the likelihood of a favorable yield response to the application of N to soybeans in any environment or at any time during the growing season is low at best, and is not predictable.

The only potential case for applying N to soybeans appears to be in high-yield environments where N uptake during seed fill may be limited due to the late-season decline in biological N fixation and a concurrent lowered soil N.

All of the above results should be evaluated each year using current commodity and N prices.

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