THE LEADING EDGE

www.yetterco.com · Yetter Manufacturing Inc · E-mail:info@yetterco.com

A PUBLICATION DEDICATED TO MAXIMIZING YIELD POTENTIAL

A Pre-Plant Routine With a Focus on the Future

Robins and mud have returned to many regions, and the ground is beginning to warm. Growers are likely beginning to follow their typical pre-plant routines.

Don't let the familiarity of the pre-plant process breed complacency; instead, growers should take some time to evaluate their process. After all, the steps taken this year have the potential to make an impact in 2010. Successful producers always work with the future in mind.

First things first

The best hybrids, the right fertilizer, and perfectly prepared soil will mean nothing if the planter putting seeds in the ground is not properly maintained. A proper planter check up is a critical part of any pre-plant routine.

High inputs costs make neglecting planter maintenance and adjustments even more costly. And, optimal planter performance results in uniform emergence and maximized yield potential—research indicates that corn yields could increase as much as 15 bushels per acre simply by improving planter performance.

1200 Series Checker

- **Read your manual** and talk to your dealer or experienced local producers about the best setting for your tillage conditions.
- **Inspect the row unit**—including parallel linkage arms, closing wheels, and seed boxes and tubes—for worn parts that can affect seed placement, closing wheel spring pressure, and row unit spring pressure.
- **Check seed meters** and all their components for excessive wear and damage.
- **Level the planter**—the most important part of the adjustment

process. Check the manual for the proper height. Planter toolbars and row unit parallel arms must be level side-to-side and front-to-rear.

- **Down pressure** is critical, especially in reduced tillage. There must be enough pressure to create a seed furrow of the proper depth—usually 1 ½ to 2 inches—in spite of the residue. Check down pressure before entering the field and after the planter, loaded with seed and fertilizer, is in the field.
- **Check the leading coulters** to be sure they are sharp enough and in good condition to handle surface residue.
- **Be flexible**. As you work, check the planter frequently to make sure the settings are appropriate for the soil conditions it is encountering. There is no substitution for frequent visual inspection of seed depth and spacing during planting.

On-going maintenance will ensure this vital piece of equipment requires minimum preparation and limited repairs year after year.

Seeds and fertilizer

Seed selection, seeding rate, and a nutrient and weed management plan are also an important part of preparing for planting.

Biotechnology (Bt) seeds have been enhanced to carry as many as three or four desirable traits, and are an attractive seed option many producers are considering. “Stacked” hybrids allow growers to take a proactive stance in the prevention and control of crop-devastating disease. Additionally, corn growers have seen a huge reduction in insecticide applications since switching to Bt varieties.

Increasing seeding rates for corn was a relatively new trend that has cooled with the increased cost of seed, but increased seeding rates still have the potential to increase profit. The factors involved must be carefully analyzed. The chosen hybrid must tolerate increased plant-to-plant competition and have the potential to increase yield enough to offset the cost of the additional seed.

Producers should consider a starter fertilizer application when planning their planting process. Starter fertilizer, when used correctly, may help ensure that seeds have everything they need to develop into healthy, highyielding plants, especially when conditions are not ideal for planting.

Many options of fertilizer attachments are available for planter fit-up.

New injection kits for coulters enhance starter fertilizer application tools. Injectors with pivoting tips aim a

fertilizer stream directly at the trench cut by the coulter to ensure pinpoint placement and eliminate the chance of splashing. A one-time investment in starter-fertilizer application equipment will quickly provide a return on producers' investment.

Be prepared with the right attachments

Consider the planter attachments in your arsenal along with the soil conditions you are likely to experience this spring and in the future. Are you just scraping by with old tools?

Have you switched tillage methods and are ready to find the right tool for your new plan? Are you ready to upgrade the units that came with your planter?

In conservation tillage—especially no-till—a residue manager operating just ahead of the planter unit clears the residue from the path of the row unit. When more tillage is desired, adding a coulter may be helpful. Floating residue managers are also great in no-till because they easily follow the soil contour, and the floater wheels help gauge the depth of the residue manager wheels.

Different conditions require different attachments. Choose the correct residue manager for the conditions.

Successfully closing the seed trench is another important consideration. The trench should be closed with residuefree soil, eliminating the chance for air pockets.The correct closing wheel configuration will ensure that loose soil over the seed is utilized in trench closing.

For the record

Recording data as planting is in progress is essential. The data is useful for comparison if producers spray later in the spring and for reference as yields come in at harvest. And late next winter, when producers look to improve upon last year's process for spring planting, the data will be critical.

New technology electronically records extremely accurate information on population, singulation, and down force—elements critical to the health of the crop. Even if producers don't use technology that can record data for smaller field zones, the oldfashioned paper-and-pencil method is still valuable. Taking notes on soil conditions– such as areas that are more clumpy or compacted, less level, or wetter than is normal for the field—the presence and health of weeds, excessive residue, and any adverse weather conditions after planting are all invaluable data. This information will aid in finding the reason for any low-yielding areas and help producers plan better management practices for future plantings.

Planting control strips are an important way to keep records. When management practices, hybrids, or fertilizer applications are changed, only a control strip planted using the previous year's methods will give producers the complete picture and the information necessary to determine if the new method was effective and profitable.

Scouting records are also valuable. Inspecting young plants is critical, not only for disease and insect control, but to shed light on planting equipment performance when certain aspects of the field as a whole are examined. Scouting the crop as it emerges, evaluating it, and making note of problem spots will help producers identify specific issues and enable them to be corrected in time for next season's planting.

Many state universities and ag organizations offer classes in effective scouting methods.

Take time out to plan

Every year, the behind-the-scenes preparation that goes into planting is critical. For producers who desire to see continuous improvement in their yields, the pre-planting routine must be both thorough and adaptable. Issues such as planter maintenance will always be critical. Remember, a vision for the future will allow producers to plan well beyond the next planting season.

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Yetter Manufacturing Co., Inc.
109 S. McDonough
Colchester, Illinois 62326
Phone:800-447-5777
FAX: 309-776-3222
www.yetterco.com
E-mail:info@yetterco.com

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