

A word on stewardship

THESE DAYS STEWARDSHIP HAS BECOME SOMETHING OF A BUZZ-WORD IN ENVIRONMENTAL CIRCLES. UNFORTUNATELY, WHEN GOOD PRINCIPLES BECOME BUZZ-WORDS, THE NOBLE INTENTIONS BEHIND THEM OFTEN GET OBSCURED.

Stewardship is simply acting in a responsible manner when managing or using resources. These can either be natural resources, such as indigenous vegetation, or manufactured products like fertilisers or herbicides. The principle is that everything we do has an impact on the environment.

In the context of sugarcane agriculture, not only is the South African sugar industry a major custodian of natural resources, but it is also a major user of agrochemicals, including fertilisers. All of these products alter the environment to a greater or lesser extent and, if applied irresponsibly, they can have a negative effect on both production and the environment.

Agrochemical companies spend millions developing and testing products. Products not only have to work, but they also have to satisfy numerous environmental safety criteria before registration is granted. Product rates and combinations, for example, are carefully tested in many field trials to determine the most effective recommendations for use. However, despite these efforts,

some users still see fit to use products at rates and combinations that suit themselves.

Increasing the recommended rate of a product that is applied does not necessarily increase its efficacy, but it does increase its impact on the environment significantly. Excesses also have to be removed by the natural system to which they are applied; often a long and damaging process.

No matter how rigorous the agrochemical companies are, once a product leaves the shelf, the responsibility for using it shifts to the user. In the case of the sugar industry, the end-user is the grower.

South African sugarcane growers are generally not required by law to be trained in the use of agrochemicals, with some exceptions, and therefore tend to rely heavily on technical advisers and Extension Specialists for advice on the best way to use a product. Whilst this is good practice, there are only a limited number of advisers, and many important decisions still have to be made by the grower.

Fortunately, there is a way to overcome this lack of knowledge, particularly in the case of agrochemicals. The product label is a mine of information. In fact, everything required to ensure the safe and successful use of a product is written on the label. This is required

by law. Unfortunately, the label is often overlooked by the end-user, who is often intimidated by the small print. Time taken to examine the label can be very valuable in ensuring a safe and favourable outcome.

In addition, through numerous trials and experiments, SASRI has developed many best management practices (BMPs) that can be used to ensure the safest and most effective way to apply various products. For example, whilst the application of fertiliser is not necessarily a hazard to human health, the irresponsible application of plant nutrients in various organic or inorganic products can be detrimental to soil health. To ensure growers practise good stewardship of fertilisers, the SASRI Fertiliser Advisory Service (FAS) provides safe and effective recommendations.

With increased pressure on profit margins and the need to make every rand spent on agrochemicals and fertilisers count, it pays to utilise the knowledge already developed by companies and research organisations such as SASRI. Using registered products and registered rates will also ensure minimum impact on the environment and ensure sustainable production into the future. ✓



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