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Farm Water Quality Planning

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This FACT SHEET is part of the **Farm Water Quality Planning (FWQP)** series, developed for a short course that provides training for growers of irrigated crops who are interested in implementing water quality protection practices. The short course teaches the basic concepts of watersheds, nonpoint source pollution (NPS), self-assessment techniques, and evaluation techniques. Management goals and practices are presented for a variety of cropping systems.



Management Goals and Management Practices: Nutrient Management Goals and Management Practices for Cool-Season Vegetables

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This Fact Sheet includes Management Goals and Management Practices for reduction of nutrient pollution in cool-season vegetables. For our purposes, we are defining a *Management Goal* (MG) as the best economically achievable technology or process for limiting the movement of nutrients, particularly nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P), into ground or surface waters. Management Goals are general (for example, “Base the amount and timing of N fertilizer applied on crop needs”).

As used here, a *Management Practice* (MP) is a specific practice to be used in accomplishing a Management Goal (for example, “Use plant tissue analysis to aid in fertilization decisions”). Growers and crop advisors have found these practices suitable for vegetable production in California’s coastal region. Management Practices are not requirements and will not necessarily be feasible or necessary for pollution control in every situation. Rather, they are options for managing N and P fertilizers and water efficiently.

The development of a comprehensive farm plan for nutrient management on cool-season vegetable crops involves a series of ten Management Goals:

- MG 1.** Evaluate current irrigation and fertilization practices and plan improvements in management.
- MG 2.** Avoid fertilizer material spills during all phases of transport, storage, and application.
- MG 3.** Base the amount and timing of N fertilizer applications on crop needs and production goals.
- MG 4.** Place N fertilizer materials where maximum plant uptake will occur.
- MG 5.** Minimize leaching losses of nitrate during non-crop periods.
- MG 6.** Operate irrigation systems to minimize deep percolation and N losses.
- MG 7.** Improve the uniformity of existing furrow irrigation.
- MG 8.** Improve the uniformity of existing sprinkler irrigation.
- MG 9.** Improve the uniformity of existing drip irrigation.
- MG 10.** Evaluate and maintain nutrient management goals and recommended practices.

To implement the Management Practices, you may require specific technical information. Consult your local UCCE Farm Advisor or visit the UC Davis Vegetable Research and Information Center Web site for help with developing these practices.

MG 1. Evaluate current irrigation and fertilization practices and plan improvements in management

- MP 1.1. Determine nitrate and salt contamination of ground water in existing wells; and assess the potential for transport of soluble contaminants such as nitrates and salts downward to the ground water and laterally to surface
- MP 1.2. Develop and implement a system for keeping long-term records on each field for water and nutrient/soil amendment inputs, cultural operations, pest problems, land leveling or other improvements, and crop yield and quality. The Farm Water Quality Plan (ANR Pub 9002) gives one method for developing a long-term system.
- MP 1.3. Review current cultural practices to develop improved nutrient and water management plans.

MG 2. Avoid fertilizer material spills during all phases of transport, storage, and application

- MP 2.1. Have organized training sessions for field personnel.
- MP 2.2. When transporting fertilizer, do not overfill trailers or tanks. Cover or cap loads properly and display appropriate placards on vehicles.
- MP 2.3. When transferring fertilizer into on-farm storage or into a fertilizer applicator, take care not to allow materials to accumulate on the soil.
- MP 2.4. Maintain all fertilizer storage facilities to meet government and industry standards and protect them from the weather.
- MP 2.5. Clean up fertilizer spills promptly.
- MP 2.6. Shut off fertilizer applicators during turns and use check valves on application equipment.
- MP 2.7. Maintain proper calibration of fertilizer application equipment.
- MP 2.8. Whenever injecting fertilizer into irrigation water, ensure that there is no backflow into wells or other water sources.
- MP 2.9. Distribute rinse water from fertilizer application equipment evenly throughout the field.

MG 3. Base the amount and timing of N and P fertilizer applications on crop needs

- MP 3.1. Determine crop nutrient requirements and establish a crop nutrient budget.
- MP 3.2. Measure nitrate levels in the irrigation water and adjust N fertilizer rate accordingly.
- MP 3.3. Before applying N and P early in the growth cycle, assess the amount of nitrate and phosphorous already present through the use of soil sampling and analysis. For soils with pH > 6.2, the most appropriate soil test is the Olsen (or bicarbonate) procedure. The Olsen procedure is acceptable for soils with a lower pH, but some laboratories may recommend a different method.
- MP 3.4. Use soil nitrate quick tests or plant tissue sampling to guide your decisions on N fertilization in the middle and late periods of the crop growth cycle.
- MP 3.5. Make multiple small applications of N fertilizer.
- MP 3.6. Make efficient P fertilizer applications.
 - MP 3.6.1. When appropriate, apply injected bands of P fertilizer into the soil. P fertilizer is generally more available to the plants if it is injected in bands than if it is applied as a broadcast application.
 - MP 3.6.2. Apply P fertilizer as close to the time of planting as possible. The longer P fertilizer is in contact with the soil, the less accessible it is to plants.

MP 3.6. When applying manure before you plant a crop, determine the nutrient content and release rate of the manure and the amount of nitrate already present in the soil. Apply manure at a rate consistent with the crop nutrient requirements.

MP 3.7. When possible, avoid water-running N fertilizer in the furrows. If fertilizer N must be water-run, make sure to maximize the uniformity of the irrigation, inject the fertilizer during the last half of the irrigation set, and manage the tailwater.

MP 3.8. Do not apply fertilizer N or surface broadcast P less than 24 hours in advance of a predicted large storm event.

MG 4. Place N fertilizer materials where maximum plant uptake will occur

MP 4.1. Incorporate N fertilizer into the crop bed by placing fertilizer on the seed row and watering it in, by knifing fertilizer into the bed, or by broadcasting fertilizer and then listing it up into the bed.

MG 5. Minimize leaching losses of nitrate during non-crop periods

MP 5.1. If conditions permit, grow a cover crop rather than leave fields fallow during the rainy season.

MP 5.2. Use only low-N fertilizers (such as N:P₂O₅:K₂O equal to 1:3:3) during bed preparation in the fall. Higher N materials may be appropriate if a crop is to be planted soon.

MG 6. Operate irrigation systems to minimize deep percolation and N and P losses (These practices apply to all system types.)

MP 6.1. Monitor soil moisture between irrigations and use that information to guide your irrigation timing decisions.

MP 6.2. Crop need should determine irrigation amount.

MP 6.3. Know the irrigation system flow rates and the time required to apply the desired inches of water.

MP 6.4. Use the minimum leaching fraction that will prevent stand establishment problems or yield reductions from salinity.

MP 6.5. When fertigating with a drip or sprinkler system, run the fertilizer in the later part of the set so as not to leach nutrients beyond the root zone. Avoid fertigating with furrow systems.

MP 6.6. Follow state regulatory requirements and industry guidelines for backflow prevention when injecting fertilizer into irrigation water (CCR Title 3). Schedule regular maintenance of backflow prevention devices.

MP 6.7. If irrigation uniformity remains low after all practical improvements have been made, consider converting to an irrigation system with a greater potential to improve uniformity in a way that minimizes deep percolation.

MP 6.8. Minimize the amount of tailwater leaving the farm during the irrigation season. Even tailwater from fields with only moderate soil nutrient levels can contain significant quantities of N and P that can lead to algal blooms and associated problems.

MG 7. Improve existing furrow irrigation uniformity

MP 7.1. Convert to surge irrigation.

MP 7.2. Where furrow runs are more than 1000 feet long, consider cutting the furrow run length in half with a corresponding decrease in set time.

MP 7.3. Use high irrigation flow rates initially to get water down the furrow and then cut the flow rates back to finish the irrigation.

MP 7.4. Reduce variations in slope when preparing irrigation furrows.

MP 7.5. Use practices that increase irrigation uniformity between furrows (e.g., by using torpedoes in furrows that don't get wheel traffic or by alternating wheel rows with each tractor pass, you can ensure greater uniformity in water advance time in all furrows).

MP 7.6. Recirculate, rechannel, or reuse surface water runoff.

MP 7.7. Keep records on a field-by-field basis of advance and recession times.

MP 7.8. Utilize the services of a mobile irrigation lab.

MG 8. Improve existing sprinkler irrigation uniformity

MP 8.1. Monitor flows and pressure variations throughout the system to detect non-uniform application.

MP 8.2. Maintain the irrigation system by repairing leaks, replacing malfunctioning sprinklers, monitoring nozzle performance for wear, and maintaining adequate water pressure through the entire set.

MP 8.3. Operate sprinklers during the least windy periods, whenever possible. When sprinkler irrigating under windy conditions, reduce the spacing between laterals when possible to optimize application uniformity.

MP 8.4. Use offset lateral moves on successive irrigations to improve distribution uniformity.

MP 8.5. Use flow-control nozzles when the pressure variation throughout the system is excessive.

MP 8.6. Make set times as short as possible during stand establishment.

MP 8.7. For very large blocks, consider converting to linear-move sprinkler systems.

MP 8.8. Utilize the services of a mobile irrigation lab.

MG 9. Improve existing drip irrigation uniformity

MP 9.1. Monitor flows and pressure variations throughout the system to detect non-uniform application.

MP 9.2. Use lateral hose lengths that ensure uniformity.

MP 9.3. Use drip tape that has a small emitter discharge exponent to reduce flow variations that result from pressure differences.

MP 9.4. Check for the potential for emitter clogging by conducting water analysis and fertilizer/water compatibility tests.

MP 9.5. Use filtration, chemical treatments, and flushing as needed to prevent or correct clogging problems.

MP 9.6. Maintain appropriate water pressure throughout the system.

MP 9.7. Utilize the services of a mobile irrigation lab.

MG 10. Evaluate and maintain nutrient management goals and recommended practices

MP 10.1. Periodically evaluate management goals and recommended practices implemented for nutrient management. Correct deficiencies as needed.

REFERENCE

Pettygrove, G. S., S. R. Grattan, B. R. Hanson, T. K. Hartz, L. E. Jackson, T. R. Lockhart, K. F. Schulbach, and R. Smith. 1998. Production guide: Nitrogen and water management for coastal cool-season vegetables. Oakland: University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Publication 21581.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

You'll find detailed information on many aspects of field crop production and resource conservation in these titles and in other publications, slide sets, CD-ROMs, and videos from UC ANR:

Nutrients and Water Quality, slide set 90/104

Protecting Groundwater Quality in Citrus Production, publication 21521

Sediments and Water Quality, slide set 91/102

To order these products, visit our online catalog at <http://anrcatalog.ucdavis.edu>. You can also place orders by mail, phone, or FAX, or request a printed catalog of publications, slide sets, CD-ROMs, and videos from

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