

# Fertilizer for Coconut

By D. Wijesinghe

It is necessary to take cognizance of two facts in order to understand the urgency in using fertilizer in coconut cultivation.

- (a) No substantial increase in the area under coconut is possible in the foreseeable future. Around 80,000 acres have been lost between the census of 1973 and 1982. Even with stringent legislation, it would be difficult to prevent more coconut lands giving way to other development projects. Unless there is a breakthrough in bringing coconut under irrigation, new cultivation will be limited to home gardens. An achievement in itself would be to retain the area under coconut at the present level of about one million acres.
- (b) Notwithstanding the above, coconut has to continue to play the dual role of providing for local consumption and earning some foreign exchange. Though the rate of population growth has been contained around 1.5%, there is an annual nett addition to the coconut consuming category. No radical change in the food habits of the Sri Lankans could be expected. The exportable surplus has dwindled from over 50% of the total production in the 1950s to the present level of 25%. Again, unless a break through in the elimination of waste in domestic processing is found or in the alternative, pre-processed coconut products are developed and popularised, the exportable surplus will be reduced further at the present levels of production.

Around 20,000 jobs and Rs. 2,000 million in foreign exchange are at stake.

Under these circumstances, short term measures to improve productivity and increase production within the shortest possible time span become urgent. By mid 1990s, the production in the country has to increase from the present level of about 2,300 million to about 3,000 million nuts per annum. Supply of good seed material, though still below the desirable levels is steadily increasing. Coconut nurseries have been improved, and new seed gardens will commence production. The rainfall has been erratic but the proposed irrigation schemes may supplement water requirements even marginally. Moisture conservation methods have been encouraged. All these measures will improve productivity but the immediate increase in production has to come from fertilizer.

The availability of organic fertilizer is a moot point. There is no such problem with inorganic fertilizer and its efficacy is also not in doubt. However, the actual usage of fertilizer in coconut is distressing. Assuming a requirement of 175,000 MT of fertilizer to cover all the coconut lands that need fertilization, the usage in the past had been less than 20%. An immediate increase of fertilizer consumption is very necessary, and an annual target of 87,500 MT will be desirable, to be achieved within the next five years.

In order to achieve this target several measures will have to be pursued vigorously—

- (a) **Extension**—It is doubtful whether the available scarce manpower resources should be dissipated by trying to cover the entire coconut area in the country. The estate sector, managed by state agencies appears to have their own arrangements. At the other extrem would be the crowded groves and neglected plantations, which require other measures to begin with. Therefore, extension for increased use of fertilizer may

be concentrated on the lands in between, specially the larger holdings and the medium-sized plantations.

- (b) **Availability**—The fertilizer distribution network has been strengthened and improved in the last few years. With the construction of fertilizer stores under the Coconut Development Project, the position will further improve. Attention to logistics—obtaining fertilizer into the stores in time, transport etc. will be the prime need.
- (c) **Credit**—The fertilizer loan scheme operated by the two national banks has been extended for two more years. Upto now only about 10% of the total quantity used for coconut has been provided under this scheme. This has to be increased to at least 20%. Within the next five years This would be 17,500 MT. per annum
- (d) **Research**—It is assumed that at any given point of time, the results of the most recent research findings on the use of fertilizer will be available to the extension workers and the cultivators in general. This is obviously a continuing process. Area specific recommendations and the most effective and economical combinations and dosages will be expected from the research sector.
- (e) **Propaganda**—As distinct from the normal extension work, high-pitch propaganda will have to be carried out at least for a period of time, to maintain the tempo. The use of mass media for this will be essential.

Of the factors that affect the use of fertilizer in any crop, we have little control over weather conditions and the price of fertilizer itself. At the moment, the policies pursued by the Government have ensured a remunerative price for coconuts. This is a plus point, the full advantage of which is yet to be taken. If the

coconut industry is to continue to play its traditional role, it is very necessary that every effort is made to make the best out of this very good situation. Without at least a minimum level of fertilizer use maintained over a period of time, there is no way in which the industry can prove itself.

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