Step 3: Finally a fertilizer calibration tool is used to convert the recommendation, expressed as kg of fertilizer per hectare of land, to a more farmer-friendly measure. Few if any small-scale farmers will have access to scales to weigh out the fertilizer and not all will know the size of the plots they are using to grow each crop. To overcome this problem, the calibration tool is based on the use of items that are freely available and that can be adapted and used as calibrated measuring scoops. These include cut-down, discarded plastic bottles that previously held water or some other liquid; bottle tops, such as the crimped metal bottle-tops commonly used to cap beer or soda (known as crown corks); or rectangular containers, such as empty match boxes. The calibration tool runs on a computer. First the dimensions of the container to be used are entered; the tool uses these to calculate the volume of the cylindrical or rectangular container. Secondly, the type of fertilizer being used is selected from a drop-down menu: not all fertilizers have the same density, so one bottle-cap full of one fertilizer will have a different weight to the same bottle-cap full of another type of fertilizer. Next the number of kg of fertilizer to be applied per hectare is entered, along with the method of application (broadcast, banding or point placement, also known as micro-dosing) and the distance between rows and plants within rows. Based on the information provided, the calibration tool provides a user-friendly fertilizer recommendation; for example, instead of 40 kg DAP per hectare it might suggest a plastic water bottle lid full of DAP applied as a band 2.1 meters long.

Where to find the OFRA tools

The FOT tools are available at http://africasoilhealth.cabi.org/tools/fertilizer-tools

The reports section of the website http://africasoilhealth.cabi.org/reports/ contains value information, including the OFRA monograph series.

Optimization of Fertilizer Recommendations in Niger

A better approach to enable small-scale farmers to derive the most benefit from their modest investments in fertilizer
Farmers who do use mineral fertilizers often buy compound fertilizers which implement such recommendations on their fields and plots where they are applied. These recommendations are not user-friendly: it is hard for farmers to know the right fertilizer to apply at the right rate of application, at the right time and in the right method of application. Applying fertilizer at the wrong rate could all result in the farmer failing to benefit from the fertilizer they purchased — they could waste their hard-earned money. The result is that these farmers’ yields are lower than they could be. This can make them food insecure and prevent them from generating cash incomes from the sale of surplus crops — locking them in to a cycle of poverty.

Even if farmers wish to apply some mineral fertilizer to their crops, it is difficult for them to know the right fertilizer to apply at the right rate of application, at the right time and in the right method of application. Applying the wrong fertilizer, applying it to the wrong crops, or applying it at the wrong rate could all result in the farmer failing to benefit from the fertilizer they purchased — they could waste their hard-earned money. The result is that these farmers’ yields are lower than they could be. This can make them food insecure and prevent them from generating cash incomes from the sale of surplus crops — locking them in to a cycle of poverty.

Most small-scale farmers in Niger apply little or no mineral fertilizers to their crops. They also usually incorporate organic matter into the soil more slowly than is ideal: manure and compost is often available only in limited amounts on small-scale farms; for crop residues, including straw and stover, there are often competing uses, such as for animal feed or bedding, as thatching materials or as fuel for cooking. In addition, organic matter is bulky and therefore expensive to transport and handle. The result is that these farmers’ yields are lower than they could be. This can make them food insecure and prevent them from generating cash incomes from the sale of surplus crops — locking them in to a cycle of poverty.

Most existing fertilizer recommendations tell farmers how much fertilizer they should apply to a specific crop, usually expressed in kg per hectare. These blanket recommendations often apply to huge areas, even up to whole countries, and encompass several agro-ecological zones. Such recommendations do not help farmers decide which of their crops a farmer wishes to grow, such that the farmer’s return on their investment in fertilizer is maximized. A set of three complementary tools, based on the principle of fertilizer optimization, has been developed for use in a range of agro-ecological zones in Niger. Fertilizer Optimisation entails allocating the available single nutrient fertilizers to the crops a farmer wishes to grow, such that the farmer’s return on their investment in fertilizer is maximized.

Fertilizer Optimisation is an approach designed to address many of these issues. Some crops respond better to the nutrients applied than others and different crops need different nutrients — for some nitrogen (N) will be the nutrient that limits the yield, while for others this will be phosphorus (P) or potassium (K). In all cases, the relationship between the price paid for fertilizer and the value of the crops produced is important.

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3 complementary tools, based on the principle of fertilizer optimization, have been developed for use in a range of agro-ecological zones in Niger. The tools are intended to be used by extension workers who have been specially trained. Working with a farmer, the extension worker uses the set of tools to generate fertilizer recommendations which reflect farmers’ specific circumstances, including hectares of the different crops grown, fertilizer prices, expected output farm gate prices, how much the farmer can afford to spend on mineral fertilizer that growing season and other relevant farming practices, such as use of manure. The recommendations generated for each farmer will be different, ‘tailor-made’, but in all cases the solution provided will result in the greatest return on the farmers’ investment in fertilizer.