BNJAR

Blue Nile Journal of Agricultural Research (BNJAR)
Vol. 1, Issue. 1, June, 2020, pp. 1-12

Journal homepage: https://www.arari.gov.et/index_bnjar.php

Crops Response to Balanced Nutrient Application in Northwestern Ethiopia

Tadele Amare[1*], Zerfu Bazie[1], Erkihun Alemu[1], Asmare Wubet[1,] Birhanu Agumas[2], Mengistu Muche[1,] Tesfaye Feyisa[2] and Desalew Fentie[3]
[1] Adet Agricultrual Research Center, P.O.Box 08, Bahir Dar , Ethiopia,
[2]Amhara Agricultural Research Institute (ARARI), P.O.Box 527, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia,
[3] Finote-selam Research sub-center
Corresponding author email: tadele17b@yahoo.com

Received: February 13, 2020
Revised: May 27, 2020
Accepted: June 25, 2020
Available online: June 29, 2020

Keywords: *Balanced fertilizer, Potassium, Zinc, Boron, Micronutrients, Soil fertility map*

ABSTRACT

Enhancing crop productivity through soil fertility management mainly by the use of synthetic fertilizers has got prior attention in Ethiopia. Recently a soil fertility map of the Amhara National Regional State developed by Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources (MoANR) and Agricultural Transformation Agency (ATA) indicates that in addition to the conventional nitrogen and phosphorus containing fertilizers (urea and DAP), the demand of potassium, sulfur, zinc, boron and other micro nutrients containing synthetic fertilizers. This research was designed to validate the developed soil fertility map with response of major cereal crops (maize, tef and wheat) at Burie-womberma , Debre-Elias, Enemey, South Achefer and Yilmana Densa districts to the application of potassium, zinc and boron containing fertilizers depicted on the map. The findings of the research showed that nitrogen and phosphorus are still the most yield limiting nutrients. The response to potassium was observed under rare cases that did not fit with the developed soil fertility map, but the finding was verified for one year and those rare cases were not observed. Application of zinc and boron containing fertilizers didn't show any significant yield advantage, indicating that fertilizers containing NPS nutrients with a major focus of NP are sufficient. Under the Vertisols (Bichena), NPSZnBK (nitrogen, phosphorus, sulfur, zinc boron and potassium) containing fertilizer were showing a yield advantage over NP fertilizer, but up on verification of the findings of the two year experiment with simple treatments there was no significant effect of the potassium, zinc and boron fertilizer over NPS alone. Based on the findings of this research, zinc, boron and potassium are not yield limiting nutrients for the study areas and crops. Therefore, potassium, zinc and boron fertilizers recommended by the fertility map of the region shall not be used anywhere without research based field verification and recommendations. Furthermore, we recommend monitoring on the state of plant nutrients in the soil and crop responses to potassium, zinc and boron fertilizers every 5 to 10 years.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Ethiopia, agricultural growth and development is crucial to overall economic and social development. However, this economy has been seriously affected by the steadily growing population that partly played its contributed for unsustainable land management practices (Berry, 2003). According to Befekadu and Berhanu (2000) the population of Ethiopia doubled from 23 to 48 million between 1960 and 1990 and it jumped over 105 million in 2018 (Ethiopian main index, 2018). Ensuring food security for the steadily growing population will continue to be a major challenge unless a strategy in place to reverse the situations. Improving and maintaining the productivity of the soil resource sustainably is one of Ethiopia's strategies to achieve its food self-sufficiency. Ethiopia’s Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) recognizes the importance of fertilizer for maintaining soil fertility and maximizing agricultural growth of the country.

In Ethiopia, commercial fertilizer use in the form of urea and DAP started in the 1960s (Murphy, 1968). Through time, site specific nitrogen and phosphorus recommendations have been developed for the major soils and major cereal crops of the Amhara Region as these nutrients have been the most yield limiting under all ecologies and most of the soils in the region. DAP and urea were the only synthetic fertilizers that were imported and used all over the country until 2015 when DAP was replaced by NPS. In Ethiopia, there has been a general lack of crop responses for potassium with the exception of reports by Wassie and Shiferaw (2011) in southern Ethiopia. On the other hand, a negative input and output balance of plant nutrients of Ethiopian agricultural soils have been reported (Scoones and Toulmin, 1999; IFPRI, 2010), that needs continuous assessment on the state of plant nutrients in the soil that are not currently yield limiting for sustainable food production in the country. Nutrient mining, and unbalanced fertilizer uses resulted in multi nutrient deficiency of Ethiopian soils (Wassie and Shiferaw 2011; 2010; Asgelil et al., 2007; Abyie et al., 2004). Demand towards balanced and blending fertilizer is growing in several countries including in China (Zhang, 2014).

Ethiopian Soil Information System (EthioSIS) was initiated by the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources (MoANR) in collaboration with Agricultural Transformation Agency (ATA) to develop and disseminate appropriate soil management recommendations and soil health information to nationwide including the Amhara Regional State. Accordingly, the soil fertility maps of the region was developed in 2013 and the final version was released in 2016 (MoANR and ATA, 2016). The map shows 100% of the soil in the region needs nitrogen, phosphorus and sulfur fertilizers; 94% of the soil needs potassium and boron fertilizers while for zinc and copper fertilizers 50.8% and 0.7%; respectively.

Developing the soil fertility map of the country strongly supports the efforts towards sustainable soil fertility management including for location specific fertilizer recommendations. However, the ground truth for the developed soil fertility map must be verified and supported by field experiments prior to its broad recommendations and applications so as to avoid unnecessary use of fertilizers. Therefore, this research was carried out to validate the response of crops to potassium, zinc and boron that are recommended by the soil fertility map of the region developed by MoANR and ATA (2016).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Description of the study area

The study was conducted on farmers’ fields of Debre Elias, Enemey, South Achefer, Yilmana Densa and Womberma districts of the western Amhara Region where maize, tef and wheat productions are prominent. The districts are among the most productive areas of the country. The response of maize (South Achefer and Womberma), bread wheat (Debre Elias and Womberma) and tef (Enemey and Yilmana Densa) was studied. Maize and wheat were tested under the Nitisols while tef was tested both on Nitisols and Vertisols.

2.2. Soil fertility map of ANRS and treatment set up

The soil fertility map of the Amhara National Regional State was developed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources (MoANR) in collaboration with Ethiopian Agricultural Transformation Agency (ATA) in 2013 for selected districts and in 2016 for the whole districts of the region (Figure 1). The responsibility of the Amhara Regional Agricultural Research Institute (ARARI) was to validate the response of major cereal crops to potassium, zinc and boron containing fertilizers (Table 1) proposed by the developed soil fertility map of the region. This paper presents the research work for the north western parts of the region. Economically recommended urea and di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) fertilizer rate for each crop was included in the treatment set up and compared with potassium, zinc and boron containing fertilizers. The recommended nitrogen rate was kept constant (Table 1, Table 2). Nitrogen was applied half at planting and half at about 30 to 45 days after planting while the whole dose of other nutrients were applied at planting. Crop management practices were kept uniform for all treatments. The experiment was conducted for two consecutive rainy seasons (2014/15 and 2015/16).

BH540 and BH660 for maize, TAY for wheat and kuncho for tef were the varieties used for the study. For maize the population was 44 444/ha with a spacing of

30 cm between plants and 75 cm between rows. Wheat and tef were planted in rows with seed rates of 125 kg/ha and 10 kg/ha respectively. A randomized complete block design was used for all the crops. Major agronomic data including grain yield were collected. The grain weight and moisture content of wheat and maize were simultaneously taken and finally adjusted to 12.5% moisture content. Collected data were subjected to the analysis of variance (ANOVA) using SAS software (SAS, 2003).

2.3. Soil sampling, preparations and analysis

Composite soil samples were collected at depths of 0-20 cm before planting for each site. Samples were air dried, ground using pestle and mortar. Soil pH was determined in a 1:2.5 soil to water suspension following the procedure outlined by Sahilemedihn and Taye (2000). Soil organic carbon content was determined by wet digestion method using the Walkley and Black procedure (Nelson and Sommers, 1982). Total nitrogen was determined using the Kjeldahl method (Bremner and Mulvaney, 1982) while the available phosphorus was determined following the Olsen procedure (Olsen and Sommer, 1982). The exchangeable potassium was measured by flame photometer after extraction of the samples with 1N ammonium acetate at pH-7 following the procedures described by Sahilemedihn and Taye (2000).

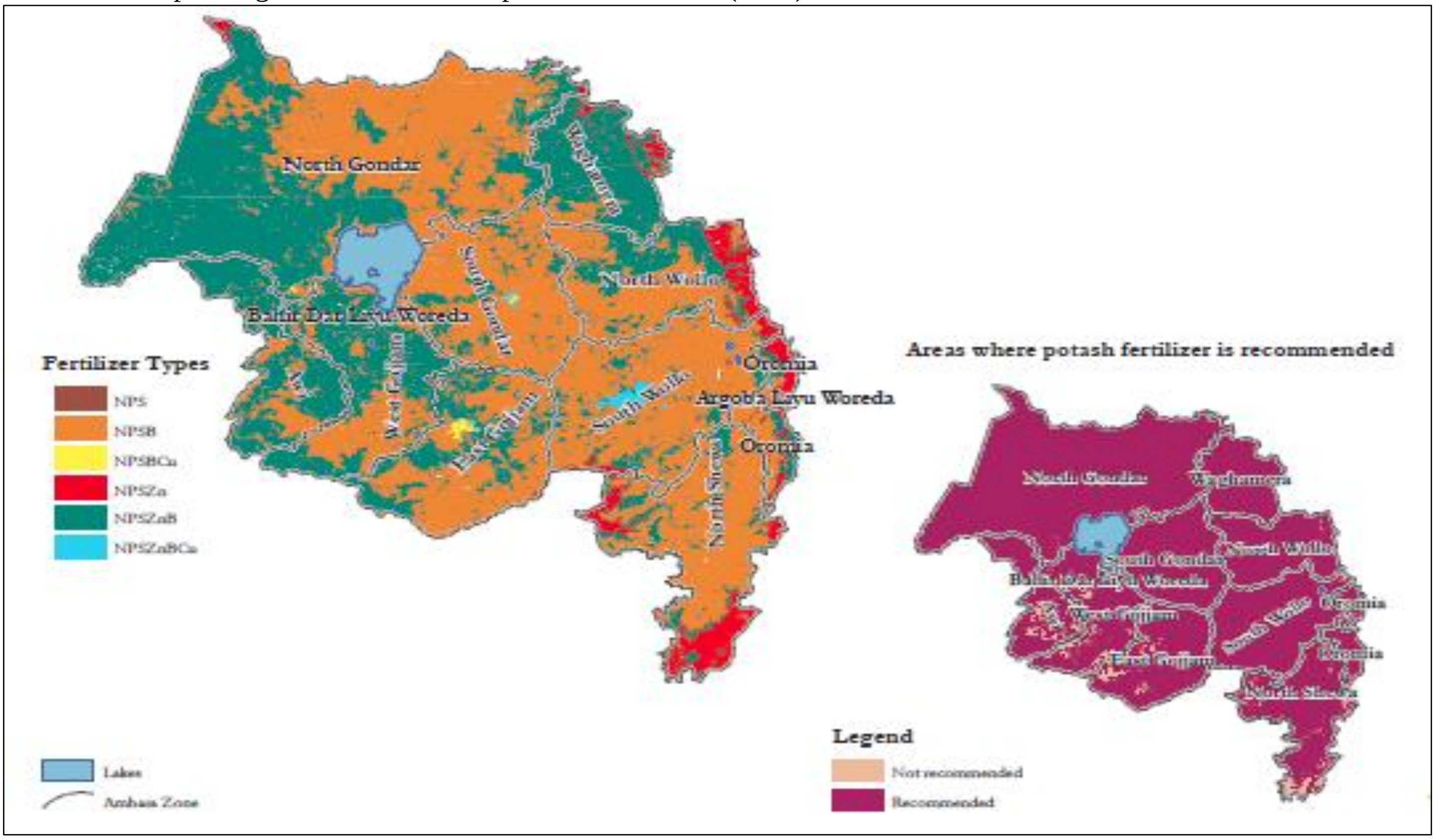

Figure 1. Recommended fertilizers for Amhara National Regional State (MoA and ATA, 2016)

Table 1. Formulas and the nutrient contents

Formula	Formulation (% nutrient composition)	Source of fertilizer
1 (NPS)	19N-38P_2O_5-7S	19 N-38 P_2O_5+7S
2 (NPSB)	18.1N-36.1-P_2O_5-6.7S- 0.71B	95 kg NPS+4.9 kg Borax
3 (NPSKB)	13.7N-27.4P_2O_5-14.4K_2O-5.1S-0.54B	72.2 kg NPS+24.1kg KCl+3.7 kg Borax
4 (NPSZnB)	16.9N-33.8P_2O_5 -7.3S-2.23Zn-0.67B	90 kg NPS +5.5kg ZnSO4+4.5 Kg Borax
5 (NPKSZnB)	13N-26.1P_2O_5-13.7K_2O-5.6S-1.72Zn-0.51B	68.7 kg NPS+22.9kg KCl+4.84kg ZnSO4 + 3.5 Borax
6 (Formula 4 modified)	17.5 N-34.9P_2O_5-7.6S - 2.23Zn -0.25B	89.38 kgNPS+6.4kg ZnSO4+1.7 kg Borax
7 (Formula 5 Modified)	13N-26.1P_2O_5-14.8K_2O-5.6S-1.72Zn-0.25B	68.7kg NPS+24.74 kg KCl+4.9kg $ZnSO_4$+1.7 kg Borax

Table 2. Treatment setups for the test crops at specific districts

Fertilizer formula	**Fertilizer types and amounts (kg/ha)***						
	Maize		Tef			Wheat	
	South Achefer	Burie-Womberma	Yilmana Densa		Bichena	Burie-Womberma	DebreElia
	Nitisol	Nitisol	Nitisol	Vertisol	Vertisol	Nitisol	Nitisol
1 (NPS)	250 (176)	250 (176)	-	-	-	-	150 (260)
2 (NPSB)	150 (220)	150 (220)	150 (50)	100 (50)	100 (146)	150 (260)	150 (260)
3 (NPSKB)	-	-	-	-	-	-	200 (262)
4 (NPSZnB)	150 (220)	150 (220)	150 (53)	100 (53)	100 (137)	150 (260)	150 (260)
5 (NPKSZnB)	150 (235)	150 (235)	200 (47)	150 (47)	150 (132)	150 (275)	-
6 (Formula 4 modified)	250 (185)	250 (185)	200 (32)	150 (32)	150 (117)	200 (245)	200 (262)
7 (Formula 5 Modified)	250 (208)	250 (208)	200 (33)	200 (33)	200 (118)	200 (263)	200 (262)

* Numbers in parenthesis indicate the amount of urea in kg/ha top-dressed in addition to the specified amounts of formula. The vacant (-) indicates that specific formula was not used.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Maize

As shown in Table 3, Table 4 and Table 5, maize did not respond to applied fertilizers containing potassium, zinc and boron. On the other hand, the yield was highly variable within short distances for both Achefer and Burie-Womberma districts where a single soil type (nitisol) is dominating with similar rainfall patterns of each district. A rare observation of response to potassium, zinc and boron containing fertilizers could not support for general recommendations as it was observed in Aferefida of south Achefer. At Aferefida in south Achefer, the maximum yield of maize (7350 kg/ha was obtained from higher rates of potassium (Table 4) which was a rare case for the two years across all the study sites that maize response to applied potassium was observed. Off course the exchangeable soil potassium of Aferefida site was lower (0.43meq/100g soil) than Ahuri (1.12 meq/100g soil) a very nearby site; both of them are above 0.25 meq/100g which is the critical value based on ammonium acetate extraction (IPI, 2016). At this site, the second highest yield (6310 kg /ha) was obtained from the lowest rate of phosphorus but with the addition of potassium. Nevertheless, this response was a single observation that was not repeated across our experimentation (Table, 3, 4, and 5). Moreover, intensive research verification with simple treatment set ups (with and without potassium, zinc and boron) showed a non-significant result (Tadele et. al., 2018). The overall result of the research is in line with findings reported by Tadele et al. (2008), but it did not support the soil fertility map developed by the MoANR and ATA (2016) for the Amhara Region. It rather intended to respond for higher rates of nitrogen and phosphorus fertilizer rates. A recent ongoing research result on maize (unpublished) in south Achefer showed that a

grain yield of maize greater than 10000 kg/ha with nitrogen and phosphorus alone (with 150 kg N/ha and 125 kg P2O5) .

Therefore, potassium application does not pay any significant yield increase of maize as the supply of the soil is presently sufficient. However, research should continue monitoring on the state soil potassium and maize response to potassium application in case it becomes a yield limiting nutrient sometime in the future. Experiences from countries including China shows that potassium fertilizer application started very lately as compared to nitrogen and phosphorus fertilizers (Zhang, 2014; Porch and Jin, 2009); while The Netherlands reached 100 kg/ha K2O on average in 1936 (Isherwood, 2010). Crop productivity in Ethiopia is still limited by nitrogen and phosphorus nutrients than potassium.

The yield of maize was not increased by the addition of the micro nutrients (Boron and Zinc) for all sites for the two cropping seasons that also fail to prove the deficiency of the micronutrients mapped for the study areas (MoANR and ATA, 2016). The finding is in line with yield response of maize to applied micronutrients in Pakistan that only increased marginal yield (6950 kg/ha with control, 7230 kg/ha with micronutrient) as reported by Kahn et al.(2014). Severe deficiency of micro-nutrients including boron and zinc mostly occurs for soils with higher pH values (Singaraval et al., 1996) and Zayed et al. (2011) claims rice productivity in rice growing countries shows a reducing trend mainly because of micro-nutrients deficiency. In contrast, the soils where the present study carried out are Nitisols and their pH ranges from slightly acidic to acidic that do not limit the availability of micro-nutrients except molybdenum.

Table 3. Maize (Variety - HB540) yield response to balanced fertilizer at South Achefer (Year 2014/15)

Treatments	Grain yield (kg/ha) Aferefida	Sibet	Layjufi	Mean
NP (200 kg Urea/ha + 200 DAP kg/ha)*	6510	4090	3700	4767
250 kg/ha Formula 1 + 176 kg/ha Urea	6430	4970	4340	5247
150 kg/ha Formula 2 + 220 kg/ha Urea	7120	5390	3840	5450
150 kg/ha Formula 4 + 220 kg/ha Urea	7380	5710	3710	5600
150 kg/ha Formula 5 + 235 kg/ha Urea	7060	6180	4580	5940
250 kg/ ha Formula 6 + 185 kg/ha Urea	6230	6300	4270	5600
LSD				NS
CV (%)				26.5

*Economical recommended rate (NP)

The north western parts of the region including the districts where the present research was carried out are characterized by high rainfall amounts and good distributions. Nevertheless, maize productivity is still below the expected potential of the area because of low rate of fertilizer application. Hence increase production and productivity of crops including maize will be realized through judicious management and utilization of nitrogen and phosphorus containing synthetic fertilizers.

Table 4. Maize (Variety - HB660) yield response to balanced fertilizer at South Achefer (Year 2015/2016)

Treatments	Grain yield (kg/ha) Aferefida	Keltafa	Ahuri	Kier	Mean
NP (200 kg Urea/ha + 200 kg DAP/ha)	5980	6950	6440	4780	6038
250 kg/ha Formula 1 + 176 kg/ha Urea	4580	7050	8500	4180	6078
150 kg/ha Formula 2 + 220 kg/ha Urea	4600	6610	6690	4250	5538
150 kg/ha Formula 4 + 220 kg/ha Urea	5140	6260	7620	5323	6086
150 kg/ha Formula 5 + 235 kg/ha Urea	6310	5830	5920	5202	5816
250 kg/ ha Formula 6 + 185 kg/ha Urea	5970	6620	7220	6846	6664
250 kg/ha Formula 7 + 208 kg/ha Urea	7350	5180	5990	8129	6662
LSD					NS
Cv (%)					19.8

Table 5. Maize (Variety BH 540) yield response to balanced fertilizer at Wonberima (Year 2014/2015)

Treatments	Grain yield (kg/ha) Sebadar	Bolden	Markuma	Wegedad	Marweld	Mean
NP (200 Urea/ha+200 kg DAP/ha)	3890	3090	4390	7080	6120	4914
250 kg/ha Formula 1+176 kg/ha Urea	5280	4180	4570	7120	5890	5408
150 kg/ha Formula 2 + 220 kg/ha Urea	5010	3100	5540	7200	5990	5368
150 kg/ha Formula 4 + 220 kg/ha Urea	6270	3670	5460	7220	4470	5418
150 kg/ha Formula 5 + 235 kg/ha Urea	4760	4050	5250	6820	5940	5364
250 kg/ ha Formula 6+185 kg/ha Urea	4060	5000	5920	7750	5550	5656
250 kg/ha Formula 7+ 208 kg/ha Urea	5360	4010	5580	6870	6450	5654
LSD						NS
CV (%)						24.8

3.2. Bread wheat (Triticum aestivum)

The response of bread wheat to fertilizers containing potassium, boron and zinc was also insignificant at both Debre Elias and Womberma Districts for the two cropping seasons (Table 6 and Table 7) that does not fit to the recently developed soil fertility map of the districts (MoANR and ATA, 2016). The result did not support the findings of bread wheat response to applied potassium by Hillette et al. (2017) and Abiye et al. (2004). They reported a significant yield increased of bread wheat for the Vertiosols of the central Highlands of Ethiopia using potassium fertilizer. For some of the study sites, the recommended NP fertilizer was better than the ones with potassium, zinc and boron containg fertilizers (Table 6 and 7) indicating that nitrogen and phosphorus are still the most yield limiting nutrients than other nutrients including potassium. The verification of research with simplified treatments showed no significant yield advantage of potassium, zinc and boron over NPS alone (Tadele et al., 2018)

There was no response to applied micro-nutrients; not supporting the soil fertility map developed for the districts. If micronutrients including zinc and boron were very deficit as stated by the soil fertility map of the studied districts the yield could be significantly affected as they are essential plant nutrients. Malakouti (2008) reported that the yield of crops like durum wheat (*Triticum durum L.)* could be increased by about 50% using micro-nutrients and under very severe deficiency of the micronutrients; there could be a situation of no harvest.

Table 6. Response of bread wheat for different blended fertilizers at Womberma

Treatment	Grain yield (Kg/ha)									
	Year1					Year 2				
	Bolden	Markuma	Wegedad	Marwold	Mean	Bolden	Markuma	Wegedad	Sebadar	Mean
NP (260 kg Urea +150 kg DAP/ha)*	4170	4280	4970	4110	4383	2510	4370	3640	2900	3355
150 kg/ha Formula 2+260 kg Urea/ha	3700	4400	5440	4150	4423	2100	4490	3230	3100	3230
150 kg/ha Formula 4+260 kg Urea/ha	3710	3830	5080	2960	3895	2500	4570	3510	3050	3408
200 kg/ha Formula 6+245 kg Urea/ha	3540	4040	5240	3290	4028	2280	4510	3830	3310	3483
150 kg/ha Formula 5+275 kg Urea/ha	3730	2150	4900	4030	3703	2300	4550	3490	3220	3390
200 kg/ha Formula 7+263 kg Urea/ha	3510	3600	5120	3930	4040	2260	4460	3120	3230	3268
LSD					NS	LSD				NS
CV (%)					20	CV (%)				27

Table 7. Response of bread wheat for different blended fertilizers at Debre Elias

Treatments	Grain yield (kg/ha)*											
	Year 1						Year 2					
	Abe.1	Yek.	D/E.Z1	D/E.Z2	Abe.2	Mean	Abe.1	Yek.	D/E.Z1	D/E.Z2	Abe.2	Mean
NP (260 kg Urea+150 kg DAP/ha)	4800	4380	4230	3960	3110	4096	4190	4340	4070	3240	4070	3982
150 kg/ha Formula 2 + 260 kg Urea/ha	5780	3920	5110	2000	2110	3784	2950	6010	3680	3600	4320	4112
150 kg/ha Formula 4 +260 kg Urea/ha	5320	3520	4580	1840	2150	3482	3280	4390	3490	3380	4060	3720
200 kg/ha Formula 6 + 245 kg Urea/ha	5650	3270	4030	2530	1980	3492	3580	4640	2720	3320	4080	3668
150 kg/ha Formula 5+275 kg Urea/ha	5180	3690	4220	2520	2700	3662	3630	3880	3580	2300	3760	3430
200 kg/ha Formula 7+ 263 kg Urea/ha	4990	3720	3790	2070	2450	3404	4020	4330	4180	2700	4020	3850
LSD						NS	LSD					NS
CV (%)						35	Cv (%)					19

* Are the study sites where: Abe.1= Abeshma 1, Yek.= Yekegat, D/E.Z1= Debre Elias zuria 1, D/E.Z2 = Debre Elias zuria 2 and Abe.2= Abeshma

3.3. Tef

Tef is one of the dominant cereal crops in north western parts of the Amhara National Regional State. It grows well both in the Vertisols and Nitisols. This paper presents the findings of two years of research on the response of tef to potassium, zinc and boron for both Nitisols and Vertisols. At Yilmana Densa district, the response of tef to potassium, boron and zinc containing fertilizers was insignificant (Table, 8) which did not support the 100 kg/ha potassium chloride recommendation by IPI (2016) and (MoAR and ATA, 2016). At Enemey, there was yield gain by the addition of balanced fertilizers over nitrogen and phosphorus use alone; which was significant in first year (Table, 9); however, there was no significant difference in the second year (Table 10). However, under our verification taking NPS fertilizer as standard there was no yield difference with the presence or absence of potassium, zinc and boron containing fertilizers (Tadele et al., 2018). Therefore, similar to maize and wheat, potassium, zinc and boron are not yet yield limiting for tef for the study areas.

Table 8. Response of tef for different blended fertilizers at Yilmana Densa (Nitisol)

Treatments	Grain yield (kg/ha) Year 1	Year 2
NP (130kg DAP/ha +36 kg Urea/ha)	1840	1810
150 kg/ha Formula 2+ 50 kg/ha Urea	1710	1760
150 kg/ha Formula 4+ 53 kg/ha Urea	1840	1720
200 kg/ha Formula 5+ 47 kg/ha Urea	1970	1730
200 kg/ha Formula 6 +32 kg/ha Urea	1780	1840
200 kg/ha Formula 7+ 33 kg Urea	1850	1850
LSD	NS	NS
CV (%)	8.3	10.1

Table 9. Response of tef for different blended fertilizers at Enemey Vertisol (Year 1)

Treatments	Grain yield (kg/ha) Year1 Weyra	Yerez	Yezerezer	M/Birhan	Mean
NP (140 kg/ha Urea + 87 kg/ha DAP)	1960	2690	2370	1700	2180
00 kg/ha Formula 2+146 kg/ha Urea	2240	2880	2880	3220	2805
100 kg/ha Formula 4+137 kg/ha Urea	2410	2540	2520	3570	2760
150 kg/ha Formula 6 +117 kg/ha Urea	1970	2140	2620	3630	2590
150 kg/ha Formula 5 +132 kg/ha Urea	2330	3230	3180	3100	2960
200 kg/ha Formula 7 + 118 kg/ha Urea	2240	2620	2750	3210	2700
LSD					755
CV (%)					19.1

Table 10. Response of tef for different blended fertilizers at Enemey Vertisol (Year 2)

Treatments	Grain yield (kg/ha) **Year 2** Weyra	Yerez	Yezerezer	M/Birhan	Mean
NP (140 kg/ha Urea + 87 kg/ha DAP)	1500	2160	2930	2420	2253
100 kg/ha Formula 2+146 kg/ha Urea	2200	1990	3060	3280	2633
100 kg/ha Formula 4+137 kg/ha Urea	1770	2260	2460	3140	2408
150 kg/ha Formula 6 +117 kg/ha Urea	2350	1710	2440	3020	2380
150 kg/ha Formula 5 +132 kg/ha Urea	2130	1500	3020	3220	2468
200 kg/ha Formula 7 + 118 kg/ha Urea	2190	1820	3200	3470	2670
LSD					NS
CV (%)					26.8

Soil analysis results

In general the response of crops to potassium, zinc and boron containing fertilizers did not agree with the recommendation made by the fertility map of the Amhara National Regional State (ATA and MoANR, 2016). The exchangeable potassium (cmol(+)/kg) for the study sites was ranged south Achefer (0.77 to 1.40), Debre Elias (1.3 to 1.45), Enemey (1.22 to 1.44), Yilmana Densa (0.91 to 1.31) and Burie-Womberma (0.93 to1.34). For all the sites the lowest values are above three times the critical values of exchangeable potassium (0.25 cmol/kg) based on ammonium extraction methods (IPI, 2016) indicating finding of crop responses was strongly justifiable.

Problem of the map with potassium may be associated with the introduction of 0.7:1 correction factor exchangeable potassium to exchangeable magnesium based on Loide (2004). The research and finding of Loide (2004) was about liming materials and their effects on the respective exchangeable base ratios including potassium to magnesium which is less relevant to our system. Interestingly, more than 90% of the region is in the range of optimum without the introduction of the correction factor; then 94% of the soil of the region converted to potassium deficiency with the correction factor (MoANR, 2016 and ATA). Moreover, the critical limits used to map the map are the major ones that affect the quality of the map. For example ATA and MoANR, (2016) used a wider range as well as higher values of exchangeable potassium (190 - 600 mg/kg equivalent to 0.49 to 1.54 cmol/kg).

The pH of the soil for the study sites were below 6 except for Enemey that ranges from 6.8 to 7.4. Therefore, the cost sustainable soil health in addition to crop responses must be considered up on applying zinc and boron based on the soil fertility map of the region (MoANR and ATA) under these acidic soils as cumulative effect of these nutrients matter. The soil organic carbon content for most of the soils was below 2% which is the critical point (Murphy, 2014) that rather needs an integrated soil fertility management. The total nitrogen was in the range from less than 0.1% to 0.29% (low to very low ranges), while the available phosphorus for most of the sites was below 10 ppm.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The research was conducted in agriculturally potential districts of the north western Amhara National Regional State (Burie-womberma, Debre-Elias, Enemey, South Achefer and Yilmana Densa) to evaluate the response of major cereal crops (maize, wheat and tef) to fertilizers that contain boron, potassium and zinc plant nutrients.

The findings of the research for crops under all districts addition of fertilizer including potassium containing ones did not show any significant yield advantage that did not justify the recommendations made by the recently developed soil fertility map of the region. The soil fertility map of the region jumped into conclusions and recommendations of fertilizers with less or no ground truth of crop responses for potassium, zinc and boron fertilizers. Recommending fertilizer without any yield advantage will hurt the economy of the country in general and the poor Ethiopian farmers in particular. Fertilizer recommendation for nutrient maintenance and build up without any yield advantage could not be accepted by our poor and subsistence farmers. Accordingly, the north western parts of the Amhara National Regional State should focus only urea and NPS fertilizer. There is no option for NPS as DAP is completely out of Ethiopian market. We do not have any proof of NPS is better than DAP. Assessment on the long term effect of fertilizer types including NPS on soil acidity shall be considered.

It will not be sure with this research finding how long will the soil support to supply sufficient amounts of potassium and micro-nutrients and hence continuous assessment of the status of soils for these nutrients and crop responses are critically important.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank for the two reviewers for sparing their time and for their critical comments and suggestions. We also thank Amhara Agricultural Research Institute (ARARI) and Adet Agricultural Research Center for the logistic matters. Our final thank goes to farmers for allowing us to do intensive research on their farms.

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