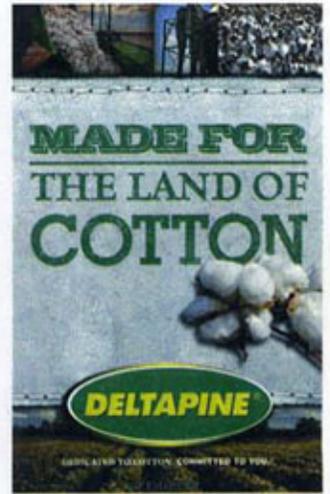


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North Carolina grower saw 2011 results

New soil amendment raising eyebrows

By Roy Roberson
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When Hiddenite, N.C., farmer Lawrence Branton took a look at his greenhouse filled with dying tobacco transplants his stomach churned and he could envision what would come next, and it was all bad.

Branton bought the transplants from neighbor and friend Chad Blake in nearby Union Grove, N.C. "I knew Chad and I would work something out, but I didn't know how we would do it," Branton recalls.

Plants were dying

The young tobacco plants in three greenhouses were dying — it was ob-

vious they weren't getting enough nutrient uptake to survive and build a strong root system.

Blake called now retired North Carolina Department of Agriculture Agronomist Glen Howard. The North Carolina agronomist had been contracted to do a series of field trials with a new soil amendment product called Quick-Sol.

Steve Speros, vice-president of sales for

Quick-Sol in North America says, "Glen asked me if we could spray some of the product on these tobacco transplants. We had never sprayed plants in a greenhouse, so I asked what they were planning to do with the plants and Glen said they would probably just throw them away. So, I figured we didn't have anything to lose," Speros recalls.

No one, from the veteran farmer Lawrence Branton, to the product promoter Steve Speros, to the veteran agronomist Glen Howard expected what happened next.

Transplants recovered

Within six days Branton's transplants were cleared up and green and, he says, about as good as any transplants he ever planted on his farm. Speros says he was amazed at the result and asked to plant a 12-acre test field of the transplants, plus a smaller field, and treat them three times with Quick-Sol.

After seeing what the product did on the transplants, Branton was quick to agree to spraying about 10 percent of his tobacco crop with a product that he didn't even know existed a few weeks earlier.

"I've been farming full time since 1976, and I've seen all kinds of snake oil products and sales people come and go. I didn't think much about spraying this product I'd never heard about on some dying tobacco transplants — I was much more worried about how to get a tobacco crop planted," Branton notes.

Branton adds that he had written off the transplants he bought from Blake and was really concerned about where he would find enough transplants so late in the planting season to finish out his crop. Not filling contracts is a big problem for any farmer, but losing the confidence of tobacco buyers is a virtual kiss of death in the highly competitive tobacco business.

Being a small acreage farmer, it was a leap of faith for Branton to risk so much of his crop on a product he knew very little about, but he did it.

Wasn't part of plan

In 2011, he planted 165 acres of tobacco and a couple hundred acres of wheat, soybeans and corn. Other than some migrant labor, Branton farms the 700 acres or so by himself. Staying small requires some careful planning and losing a greenhouse full of tobacco plants definitely wasn't part of his farm plan for 2011.

The key to staying profitable in tobacco farming, he stresses, is growing a quality crop. Typically, he shoots for 2,400 to 2,500 pounds per acre. "Some years we grow more per acre, but on our land getting 2,500 pounds per acre and keeping quality up is a good crop," the North Carolina grower says.

Glen Howard applied the last two of

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MONSANTO



Soil amendment baffles Carolina grower

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three total applications of Quick-Sol on Branton's 12-acre tobacco field. After the last spray he told Branton he left enough material in his sprayer to spray an acre. "I needed to spray some hail-damaged tobacco, so I needed the sprayer, but didn't have anywhere to use it on tobacco," Branton recalls.

Noticed a difference

"I had a field of soybeans right behind my house, so I sprayed it on outside rows, the side nearest to my house. Within five days I was walking across my back yard and noticed something different about the soybeans. I could see where the sprayer had



NORTH CAROLINA farmer Lawrence Branton checks soybeans treated with new soil amendment product.

stopped and the beans I had sprayed were 6-8 inches taller than the other beans," the veteran North Carolina farmer says.

In July Speros came back to the Branton farm to harvest the Quick-Sol tobacco fields. "I told him about the soybeans, and we walked out in the field and pulled up a plant from the treated rows and one from the untreated rows, and I was amazed at how much bigger root system the treated plants had," Branton stresses.

Subsequently, Branton says he has watched the soybean crop throughout the summer and fall. By November, the material had spread out into the soil and it was clear to see a richer brown color to the soybeans that had been sprayed and the color faded out to 50 feet or so, where the material moved in the soil.

At that time, Speros pulled up two more soybean plants and made the sprayed versus unsprayed comparison. "The root system was even more developed and no-

ticeable much larger than the untreated beans," Branton says.

Though he understands the significance of having a strong root system under a plant, the North Carolina grower is much more interested in what happens above the ground. "On these treated soybeans, it is clear to me that there are 20-25 percent more pods on the treated beans," he says.

Getting more soybeans out of 200 acres of soybeans is a good thing, but the big bonus Branton says is what happened with his tobacco.

His total average for his farm in 2011 was just over 3,300 pounds per acre — a good crop and nearly 1,000 pounds per acre more than his target. The 12 acres he sprayed with Quick-Sol came in at a whopping 4,975 pounds per acre.

"Normally, big tobacco doesn't cure as well as smaller leaves. I carried the top of these bigger leaves from the Quick-Sol field to sell to Phillip Morris tobacco buyers. A score of '1' is about as good as it gets with tobacco quality and when this oversized tobacco hit the conveyor belt, the buyer turned to me and asked me if '1' was good enough," Branton says.

Normally, big and heavy tobacco will turn down the stalk. But this field of tobacco held the leaves up all the way through the growing season, he notes.

Despite his 30-plus years making a living growing tobacco and other crops, Branton says he is at a loss to explain exactly how Quick-Sol helped his tobacco crop. "It does something to allow the plant to feed better. I think it's taking a lot of the yield-robbing things, like diseases, out of the picture — I don't know how it does that, but I saw it happen," he adds.

Has seen enough

"I've seen enough to know that every crop I plant next year will be sprayed with the product," Branton stresses. Farmers and agribusiness people who know the conservative nature and 'show me' attitude of Lawrence Branton may be shocked by that statement says Bobby Vause, owner and manager of Vause Equipment Company in Fayetteville, N.C. Vause, who has sold New Holland equipment to Branton for many years, says he has never seen the North Carolina farmer so committed to any product.

Branton says he is confident the soybeans he treated with the left over spray last year will produce 20 percent more beans than the untreated fields on his farm. At the current (early November) price of soybeans that would be roughly \$100 per acre more than his farm average for soybean.

"What we saw on soybeans was just by accident — it was eye-catching and may help us grow more soybeans, but the real test was on our tobacco," Branton stresses.

In a second tobacco field, treated with the same three applications of Quick-Sol

(12 ounces at layby, 10 ounces at topping and 4 ounces late-season), the North Carolina farmer harvested 3,860 pounds of tobacco per acre. "This field is historically among the worst tobacco land I plant. It has some black-shank in it and it just doesn't yield as good as other parts of my farm," he says.

Topped on-farm average

Though significantly less than the 12-acre field that topped 4,900 pounds per

acre, this field of tobacco still topped his on-farm average by more than 500 pounds per acre and his target yield by well over 1,000 pounds per acre.

"We had an excellent growing season for tobacco, with just enough rain at the right time and that obviously played a role in our high yields. But, I've been growing crops a long time, and I know there is more to getting these extremely high yields and high quality tobacco than just good weather," the North Carolina grower says.

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