

# Further field evaluation of the controlled release nitrogen fertiliser Smartfert®

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## Abstract

Five field trials were conducted over 2 years in which the effects of single applications of different rates of a controlled release nitrogen (N) fertiliser, Smartfert, on pasture production and pasture N concentration were measured, relative to the same rates of SustainN. The 2016 trials also compared multiple applications of SustainN with a single application of Smartfert. Pasture responses to SustainN relative to the control generally occurred within the first one to three harvests following application and then declined and became negative in the later harvests. The pasture responses to Smartfert developed more slowly and were greatest after the third harvest. In terms of total production significant ( $P < 0.05$ ) responses to Smartfert relative to the same rate of N applied as SustainN occurred in three trials. SustainN significantly increase pasture production at one site relative to Smartfert. In three trials pasture production from single applications of Smartfert applied at 100 kg N/ha were the same and in one case better ( $P < 0.05$ ) than three consecutive applications of 33 kg N/ha of SustainN. The soluble N fertilisers, urea and SustainN, elevated the mixed-pasture N concentration relative to control and to Smartfert in the first harvest following application. The nitrogen use efficiency (NUE, kg DM/kg fertiliser N applied) of Smartfert was significantly greater ( $P < 0.05$ ) than for SustainN in two trials.

**Keywords:** fertiliser, nitrogen, nitrogen use efficiency, pasture, Smartfert, urea, SustainN

## Introduction

New Zealand uses about 350 000 tonnes of fertiliser N annually (Fertiliser Matters 2010) most of which is applied in a readily available, water-soluble form, such as urea, ammonium sulphate or diammonium phosphate. The N in such products is subject to losses to the environment via: volatilisation (ammonium), denitrification (nitrogen and nitrous oxides gases), leaching (nitrate) and runoff (ammonium and nitrate).

There are international (Our Nutrient World 2013) and national (Ministry of Primary Industries 2013) initiatives to increase nitrogen (N) use efficiency (NUE), driven by both economic and environmental considerations and concerns. There are many ways to define and hence measure NUE and de Klein *et al.* (2016) have usefully defined three broad categories:

Crop NUE, Animal NUE and Whole farm NUE. They defined the Crop NUE as the crop dry matter (DM) per unit of N input of which fertiliser NUE (kg DM/kg fertiliser N applied) is a subset.

Edmeades (2015) reported on the evaluation of Smartfert, a controlled release nitrogen fertiliser which, in three field trials, increased the NUE (kg DM/kg N applied) in pastures by between 5-50%, depending on the site and the rate of application.

In this paper the results from five further field trials are discussed focussing on the potential economic and environmental benefits and the NUE (kg DM/kg fertiliser N applied) of Smartfert.

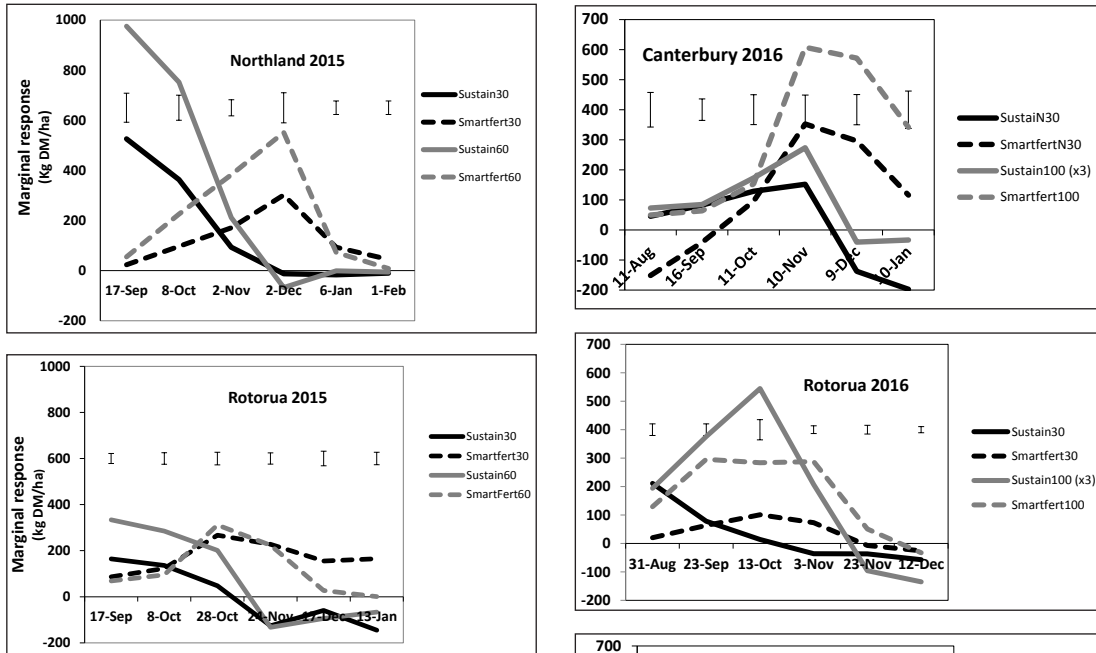
## Methods

### Field Trials

Three field trials were conducted in 2014 and have been described earlier (Edmeades 2015). Mixed-pasture samples were collected at each harvest from these trials, either on a per plot basis (Taupo) or bulked over replicates (Rotorua and Northland) and have been analysed for total nitrogen concentration (N%). These results are reported in this paper.

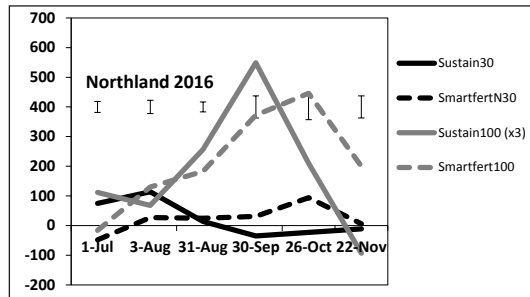
Five further field trials were conducted, two in 2015 and further three in 2016. All these trials (mowing with clippings removed, plot size 2 x 6 m) were on clover-based pastures using standard management and measurements techniques (Lynch 1966). The trial designs and treatments, however, were changed between years driven largely by commercial rather than scientific considerations. For example, SustainN (urea treated with a urease inhibitor), a proprietary product from Ballance AgriNutrients Ltd was used as the standard for comparison with Smartfert.

The two 2015 trials, one each in Northland and Rotorua, comprised six replicates of seven treatments: control, SustainN 30 kg N/ha (SustainN30), SustainN 60 kg N/ha (SustainN60), Smartfert 30 kg N/ha (Smartfert30), Smartfert 60 kg N/ha/yr (Smartfert60) and a 50:50 mix of SustainN and Smartfert applied at 30 or 60 kg N/ha. The treatments were applied once at the commencement of the trials in September and the production measurements terminated after 6 harvests in either January or February. Pasture DM (kg DM/ha) was measured on a per plot basis, and for the Rotorua trial only, the mixed-pasture N concentrations were measured on samples bulked by treatments.



**Figure 1** Marginal pasture responses (kg DM/ha) relative to control over time after single applications of two rates of Sustain and SmartFert (30 and 60 kg N/ha) in two trials in 2015. Vertical bars are SED's.

Three further trials in Northland, Rotorua and Canterbury were commenced in early spring (July or August) in 2016. The number of replications was increased to 10 and each trial comprised seven treatments: control, Sustain 30 kg N/ha (Sustain30), Sustain 100 kg N/ha applied in 3 equal applications (Sustain 100 x 3), Smartfert 30 kg N/ha (Smartfert30), Smartfert 100 kg N/ha applied once at the commencement of the trial (Smartfert100), and a 30:70 mix of Sustain and Smartfert applied once at 30 or 100 kg N/ha. Six harvests were taken on each trial which were terminated between late November and early January. For each trial, pasture DM (kg DM/ha) was measured on a plot basis and mixed-pasture N concentrations were measured on a bulked treatment basis. The results from the mixed-fertiliser treatments in 2015 and 2016 are not discussed in this paper because they are predictable from the proportions of the two types of fertiliser present in the mixes.



**Figure 2** Marginal pasture responses (kg DM/ha) relative to control over time after single applications of Sustain, Smartfert (30 kg N/ha) and Smartfert (100 kg N/ha) and split applications of Sustain (3 x 33 kg N/ha) in three trials in 2016. Vertical bars are SED's.

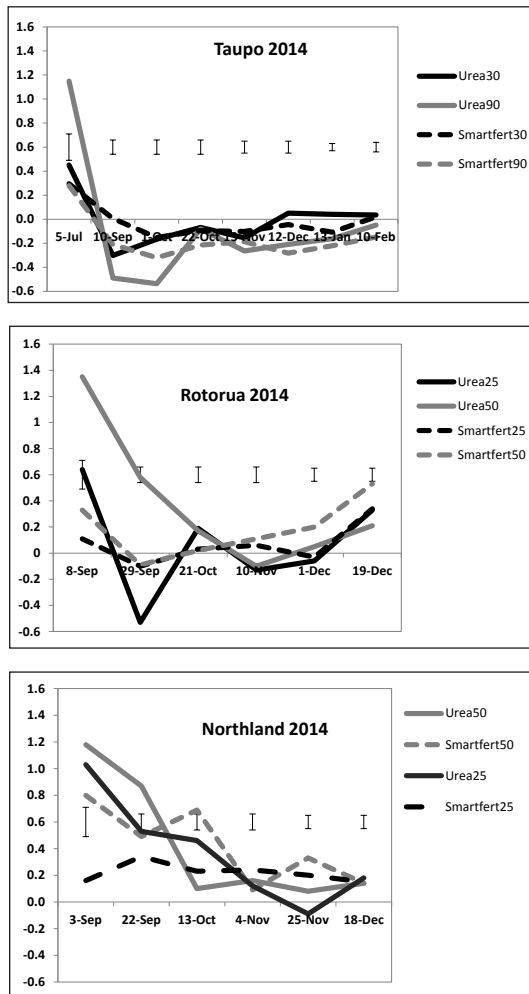
## Results and Discussion

### Pasture DM

The total pasture production (kg DM/ha) over the duration of each trial from each treatment in the two 2015 and the three trials in 2016 are given in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. The marginal (relative to the control) pasture production responses at each harvest date are presented in Figure 1 (2015 trials) and Figure 2 (2016 trials).

**Table 1** Total pasture production (kg DM/ha) on two sites in 2015 after treatment with single applications of two rates (30 kg N/ha and 60 kg N/ha) of Sustain or Smartfert.

| Site      | Control | Sustain 30 | Smartfert 30 | Sustain60 | Smartfert 60 | SED |
|-----------|---------|------------|--------------|-----------|--------------|-----|
| Northland | 2937    | 3881       | 3669         | 4803      | 4231         | 183 |
| Rotorua   | 6241    | 6140       | 7087         | 6712      | 6960         | 306 |



**Figure 3** Marginal pasture nitrogen concentrations (N%) relative to control over time after single applications of two rates of urea or Smartfert (25 and 50 kg N/ha) in three trials in 2014. Vertical bars are the SED's. These were measured in the Taupo trial where the %N was measured on a per plot basis and it is assumed that the same variability applies to the other two trials in which the %N was measured on samples bulked by treatment.

**Table 2** Total pasture production (kg DM/ha) after treatment with single applications of SustaiN or Smartfert at 30 kg N/ha, a single application of Smartfert (100 kg N/ha) and 100 kg/ha SustaiN applied in three applications on three sites in 2016.

| Site       | Control | SustaiN 30 | Smartfert 30 | SustaiN 100 (x3) | Smartfert 100 | SED |
|------------|---------|------------|--------------|------------------|---------------|-----|
| Northland  | 5141    | 5277       | 5274         | 6246             | 6456          | 263 |
| Rotorua    | 3707    | 3881       | 3931         | 4799             | 4723          | 164 |
| Canterbury | 5824    | 5897       | 6491         | 6353             | 7610          | 442 |

The control DM yields indicate that the most and least productive sites were Rotorua (2015) and Northland (2015), respectively, and the most responsive site to soluble N (SustaiN) was the Northland (2015) site. The Rotorua (2015) and the Northland (2016) sites were the least responsive sites to soluble N (SustaiN). At comparable rates of N application, SustaiN and Smartfert gave similar overall yields, but significant ( $P < 0.05$ ) responses to Smartfert relative to the same rate of N applied as SustaiN were recorded in Rotorua (2015) at the 30 kg N/ha rate and in Canterbury (2016) at the 100 kg N/ha rate. At the Northland site in 2015 the yield from SustaiN was greater ( $P < 0.05$ ) than from Smartfert when compared at 60 kg N/ha.

Pasture responses to SustaiN relative to control generally occurred within the first one to three harvests and then declined, whereas the pasture responses to Smartfert developed more slowly and were greatest after the third harvest (Figures 1, 2). This pattern was similar to the results from three pasture trials reported earlier (Edmeades 2015) in which urea was compared to Smartfert, consistent with the conclusion reached by Edmeades & McBride (2012) that there is little difference in the agronomic performance of urea and SustaiN.

A further feature of these results is the development several months after application of depressions in pasture growth relative to the control from SustaiN treated pastures. This trend was also apparent in the earlier trials with urea (Edmeades 2015) and has been reported elsewhere (Feyer *et al.* 1985; Carlson *et al.* 2017). Feyer *et al.* (1985) showed that depressions in pasture production due to urea developed over time and could be attributed the reduced clover content in the urea treated pastures. In the current trials, pasture responses to Smartfert also declined over time but did not become negative, at least over the trial duration.

The 2016 trials compared the effect of Smartfert applied once at 100 kg N/ha with three equal applications of 33 kg N/ha as SustaiN. In the Canterbury trial, Smartfert applied once at 100 kg N/ha outyielded the production ( $P < 0.05$ ) from multiple applications of SustaiN, but in the other two trials this difference was not significant. This is consistent with the results from the 2014 Taupo trial reported earlier (Edmeades 2015). These results have important economic and farm management implications.

Current advice on soluble fertiliser N use (Roberts & Morton 2004) is based on the knowledge that pasture

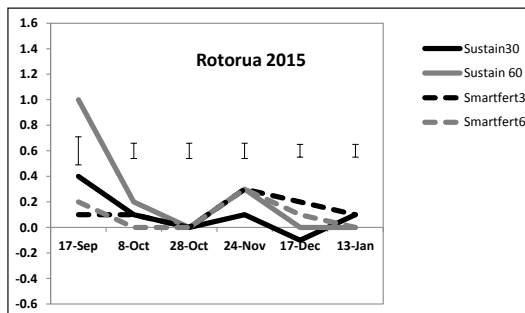
responses to soluble N fertiliser, such as urea and SustainN last about 4-6 weeks, advice consistent with the results in Figures 2 and 3. Thus, some dairy farmers apply sequential applications of 20-30 kg N/ha every 4-6 weeks. The current results (Table 2) indicate that the same pasture production can be achieved with single large applications of Smartfert, thus reducing on-farm application costs. Some sheep and beef farmers apply soluble N fertiliser N 4-6 weeks before likely feed shortfalls, such as during lambing. These results show that the additional pasture growth from SmartFert is spread over a longer time and hence the timing of application is not so important, allowing for greater flexibility.

### Mixed pasture N concentration

The mixed-pasture N concentrations, expressed as the difference from the control, for the seven trials in which this parameter was measured, including the three trials completed in 2014, are presented in Figures 3, 4 and 5. In the 2014 and the 2015 trials the soluble N fertilisers, urea and SustainN, significantly increased the mixed-pasture N concentrations in the first harvest relative to the control and relative to Smartfert. This effect was not apparent in the three 2016 trials.

Most of the nitrate N leached from intensive dairy systems originates from the urine patch (Shepherd & Lucci 2013) and it has been shown that there is an almost linear relationship between N intakes and excreted urinary N (Dijkstra *et al.* 2013). There are two factors which affect N intake - the amount of DM consumed and the N concentration of the DM (Shepherd & Lucci 2013). They calculated that modest increases in pasture N concentration of 5-10% could increase N leaching by 1-5 kg N/ha.

Based on the 2014 and 2015 results (Figure 3) the



**Figure 4** Marginal pasture nitrogen concentrations (N%) relative to control over time after single applications of two rates of Sustain and Smartfert (30 and 60 kg N/ha) on a trial in 2015. Vertical bars are the SED's assuming the same variability as measured in the Taupo 2014 trial.

average difference in pasture N concentration in the first harvest following application of either Smartfert N or soluble fertiliser N ranges from 12-18%. This suggests that replacing soluble N fertiliser with Smartfert may reduce N leaching by 5-10 kg N/ha per grazing (M. Shepherd pers. comm.). This calculation assumes that the pasture N concentration for Smartfert was 4.2%, that the pasture on offer was 1000-1500 kg DM/ha and that relative to Smartfert, soluble N increased pasture production by about 200 kg DM/ha.

### NUE ratios

Nitrogen use efficiency ratios based on kg DM/kg N applied are presented in Table 3 for the 2015 trials and Table 4 for the 2016 trials. The measured NUEs ranged from -3.3 to 31 kg DM/kg N applied across all trials, products and rates.

Large ( $P < 0.05$ ) increases in NUE for Smartfert

**Table 3** The nutrient use efficiency (NUE) (kg DM/kg N applied)<sup>1</sup> relative to the control of a single application of two rates of Sustain or Smartfert on two sites in 2015.

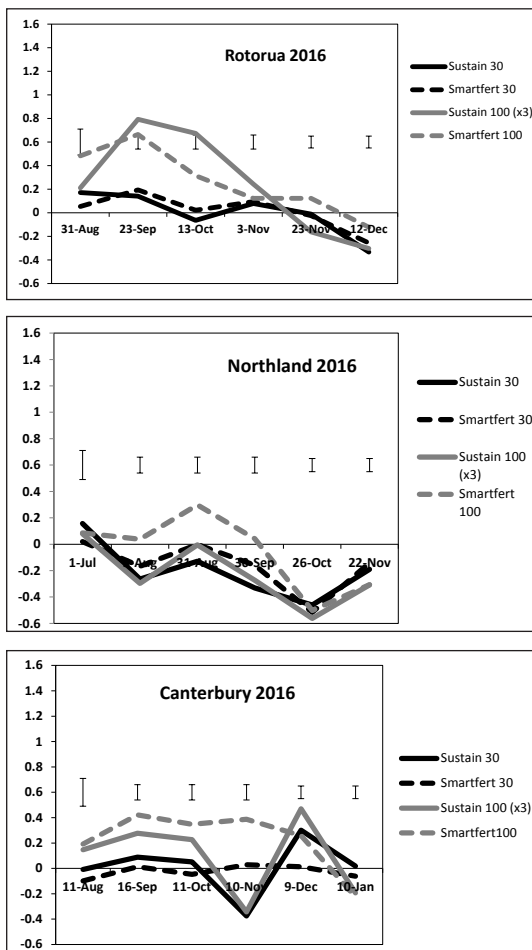
| Site      |     | Sustain 30 | Sustain 60 | Smartfert30 | Smartfert 60 | SED |
|-----------|-----|------------|------------|-------------|--------------|-----|
| Northland | NUE | 31         | 31         | 24          | 22           | 5.6 |
| Rotorua   | NUE | -3.3       | 7.9        | 28          | 12           | 8.9 |

<sup>1</sup>Measured over 6 harvests.

**Table 4** The nutrient use efficiency (NUE) (kg DM/kg N applied)<sup>1</sup> relative to the control of a single application of Sustain or Smartfert at 30 kg N/ha, a single application of Smartfert at 100 kg N/ha and a multiple (3x) application of Sustain at 33 kg/ha on three sites in 2016.

| Site       | Sustain 30 | Smartfert30 | Sustain 33x3 | Smartfert 100 | SED  |
|------------|------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|------|
| Northland  | 4.5        | 4.5         | 11.3         | 13.5          | 6.9  |
| Rotorua    | 5.8        | 7.5         | 10.9         | 10.1          | 4.7  |
| Canterbury | 2.4        | 22          | 5.3          | 17.8          | 12.9 |

<sup>1</sup>Measured over 6 harvests.



**Figure 5** Marginal pasture nitrogen concentrations (N%) relative to control over time after single applications of Sustain and Smartfert (30 kg N/ha) and Smartfert (100 kg N/ha) and split applications of Sustain (3 x 33 kg N/ha) in three trials in 2016. Vertical bars are the SED's assuming the same variability as measured in the Taupo 2014 trial.

relative to Sustain were recorded in the 2015 Rotorua and the 2016 Canterbury trials at 30 kg N/ha. A large but not statistically significant increase in NUE was recorded for Smartfert 100 relative to Sustain (3 x 33 kg N/ha) in the 2016 Canterbury trial. In comparison, Edmeades (2015) reported increases in NUE for Smartfert of between 5-50% in three earlier trials, but none of these effects were statistically significant. These increases in NUE for Smartfert suggest the N losses via leaching, volatilisation and denitrification are less than from urea.

## Conclusions

The results suggest that Smartfert can be used to reduce fertiliser N application costs by reducing the number of applications of soluble N fertiliser and/or reducing

pasture N concentrations and hence N leaching. Further research, however, is required to define the conditions where these benefits can be confidently captured, noting that the motivation for these trials was driven by commercial rather than scientific considerations. It is for this reason no site specific soil or meteorological data were collected to assist with deciding the reasons for the different size and patterns for the pasture responses to either Sustain or Smartfert between the various experiments.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded by Ballance AgriNutrients Ltd who market Smartfert under their brandname StrategN. Technical assistance with the field trial by Sarah Anderson, Duncan Bayne and Peter Carey is appreciated and acknowledged. We thank Dr Mark Shepherd (AgResearch) for useful discussions and for the use of his as yet unpublished desktop calculator for estimating the effect of pasture N concentrations of the amount of N leached.

**Disclosure:** The author was retained as a science advisor by Eko360 Ltd, a New Zealand based company licensed to market SmartFert, and has no pecuniary interest in this company or Ballance AgriNutrients Ltd.

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