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ONTARIO SOIL AND CROP IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION

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New Soil Analysis Discount for Association Members

By Amy Petherick for Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association

Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA) members will now have access to reduced soil analysis rates at select laboratories in Ontario.

Effective as of October 2015, any paid member of OSCIA may request a 10% discount on select services from A&L Canada, Exova, SGS Agri-Food Labs, and Stratford Agri-Analysis. Although each lab has restricted the discount to certain analysis packages, all of the labs will honour the discount until December 31, 2016. Cathy Dibble, OSCIA Regional Communications Coordinator for Thames Valley Region, says the idea for the discount was suggested by several individuals as another way for the association to offer even more benefits to its membership. She says the labs will apply the discount directly to testing fees. A coupon issued by your local association Secretary or by the Regional Communication Coordinator, must be submitted with all soil samples.

“A big goal, for everyone I’ve spoken with, is to get more producers soil testing on a regular basis,” she says. Retailers, consultants, labs, and other Regional Communications Coordinators all express concern over the number of farmers who are not soil testing regularly she says. Jake Munroe, Soil Fertility Specialist with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, says even though there are some regional differences his colleagues largely agree many farmers don’t soil test every three years which is the minimum that’s recommended.

“In a corn-soy-wheat rotation, sampling right after wheat comes off, before any manure or fertilizer is put on, is a good routine,” he suggests. Generally he sees larger operations with a dedicated agronomist doing the best job of soil testing their farms, but mostly practices can be traced back to the mindset of the primary producer. Those who understand their soil nutrient levels can be much more efficient with fertility inputs. A long term phosphorous and potassium study currently being conducted by the Ministry in partnership with the University of Guelph is only halfway complete, but already highlights the importance of knowing phosphorus and potassium levels in particular.

“If you want to be applying fertilizer economically, you really need to know where that phosphorous level is and the same goes for potassium,” he says. “If you want to be getting top yields, it is important to maintain phosphorous levels in the moderate range.”

As if that wasn't reason enough for farmers to be paying close attention to soil phosphorus levels, Munroe says it's also important to remember the public eye is on Ontario. Since nutrient levels in the Great Lakes are increasingly under focus, he knows it's going to become increasingly important for the industry to implement best management practices that help reduce phosphorus loading. He thinks it's very prudent for Ontario farm groups to continue to promote responsible management of nutrient inputs and considers soil tests to be one of the easier ways farmers can demonstrate good environmental stewardship.

"With corn fertilizer costs approaching \$200 an acre, spending a few dollars an acre for soil testing is a very wise investment" stated Alan Kruszel, President of OSCIA. In his opinion, farmers can no longer afford not to do regular soil testing. "If you don't know what's in your soil, how can you know how much fertilizer you need to apply? You might be needlessly over applying or worse, not applying enough causing a yield loss. Both scenarios may have a serious impact on your bottom line!" he added.

Jack Legg, Branch Manager for SGS Agri-Food Labs noted that, "in 2014, of all our samples, 50% were less than 20 ppm for phosphorus or less than 120 ppm for potassium, which are considered critical levels. Having an incentive for the membership will be a reminder on the importance for soil testing."

Legg says he realizes there are a lot of things that have to happen when there's no frost in the ground, so it's easy for soil testing to get put on the back burner. But Dan Clarke, Executive VP at A&L Canada, hopes this will help farmers get sampling practices off that back burner and ideally, inspire them to get out into the field.

"There's a lot to be learned while walking those fields as they're soil sampling," he says. "If every Soil and Crop member actually soil samples their farm properly and improves their management; that would be the dream."

Too often, quality control in the lab is compromised by poor field sampling. Clarke suggests any OSCIA member intending to take advantage of the new discount quickly review proper use of sampling tools and remind themselves of recommended sample sizes, areas, depth and submission preparation. With these best practices fresh in their mind, many farmers could find a simple soil test providing the best return on investment of any cost of production incurred this year.

For full program details, go to (www.ontariosoilcrop.org) or contact your Regional Communications Coordinator or local SCIA Secretary. The Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association was founded in 1939, is a unique non-profit farm organization with 50 county/district associations encompassing 11 regions across the province. OSCIA is farmers actively seeking, testing and adopting optimal farm production and stewardship practices.