

Farmers predict higher food prices as urea fertiliser runs low



Pineapple farmer Roopchand Chanderbally stands in his Williamsville field. PHOTO BY KRISTIAN DE SILVA

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The shutdown of Nutrien's ammonia operations at Point Lisas is slowing the supply of nitrogen fertiliser and farmers say the shortage is already affecting crops in both pineapple and rice fields.

Farmers warn that production and prices will be hit in the coming weeks if access to nitrogen fertiliser is not restored.

Nitrogen is needed for leafy crops and is essential for plant growth.

Urea, which was produced by Nutrien, carries the highest concentration of nitrogen.

Pineapple farmer Roopchand Chanderbally, who cultivates ten acres of pineapples in Williamsville, said his young plants are already showing stress.

"It will affect me because when we have young pines we use urea," he said. "I have a young field over there and you could see the yellowed leaves.

All my small fields are lacking urea salt. We have to improvise a little with other fertilisers, and it is costing us a lot more."

He said he has been using alternative sources of nitrogen.

"Right now, because we cannot get urea, we have no choice but to use sulfate of ammonia," he said, adding that the price of this substitute fertiliser has started to climb.

"This shortage is hitting us hard and the price will keep going up, which means additional costs for us," he added.

Chanderbally explained, "Urea keeps the plants green. The other salt is more for the bearing and the fruits."

With the Christmas season approaching and demand for produce high, Chanderbally said the price of produce will skyrocket.

"To bring the pineapple crop to standard we use plenty of urea," he said. "But if we do not have urea, we will get small produce and that will be losses because we sell pineapples per pound." Chanderbally called on the Government to address the urea shortage.

"If we do not get the fertiliser we cannot produce the crops," he said, adding that he will have no choice but to abandon pineapple farming and switch to other types of crops if the problem is not rectified soon.

Last week, rice farmers in central Trinidad—including areas like Warrenville—also reported nitrogen shortages and declining yields.

Speaking on the Morning Brew yesterday, president of the Agriculture Society of T&T (ASTT), Darryl Rampersad, said urea is used across all crop types.

"Rice farmers reached out with a concern, but they are only about 15 per cent of the farming community," he said.

"If they are seeing the effects of not having this product, imagine the other 85 per cent." Rampersad said nitrogen is essential for plant growth.

"All farmers use nitrogen in their crops," he said. "People in places like Icacos and St Clair growing callaloo bush and dasheen bush

will be reaching out too because they also use nitrogen.” He warned that rising input costs will ripple through the food supply chain.

“The farmer has to bear the cost and at some point it will be passed on to the consumer,” he said.

“Higher input cost leads farmers to reduce the amount of crops they grow. A farmer doing ten acres might do seven acres.” He added that the country has faced similar shortages before.

“When the urea plant closed down, the items doubled in cost and the farmers had to bear it,” he said.

Rampersad also noted that many growers cannot access the Government’s fertiliser incentive programme.

“There is a large percentage of the farming community that cannot access the incentive programme because of land tenure issues,” he said.

Meanwhile, businessman and agronomist Jason Teeluck, owner of AgroPlus 2007, said farmers are grabbing whatever urea remains on the market.

“Urea is 46 per cent nitrogen. Farmers use it on all plants,” he said. “Small-scale farmers and backyard gardeners depend on it because it is a cheaper source of nitrogen.”

The shutdown at Point Lisas began on October 23 when Nutrien commenced a “controlled shutdown” of its Trinidad nitrogen operations.

The company cited port access restrictions imposed by the National Energy Corporation (NEC) and a lack of reliable, affordable natural gas supply as the reason for the closure. Nutrien said it continues to engage stakeholders to evaluate options—but as of now, the facility remains offline.

Guardian Media reached out to Agriculture Minister Ravi Ratiram for comment and is awaiting a response.

Junior Minister Saddam Hosein also did not reply to messages. One of Ratiram’s advisors stated the minister was in the Senate and would look into the situation.