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IMC agronomist sees better services as key to better markets

DROP in at nearly any regional or national meeting where fertilizer people are discussing grade and ratio recommendations, farmer education in plant food use, soil testing, dealer (or manufacturer) services for growers, or college-industry-government relations, and the chances are you'll happen upon R. P. Thomas of International Minerals & Chemical. For these are some of the chief interests of IMC agronomist Thomas, until recently known as technical service supervisor for the company's plant food division.

His plant food interests encompass a number of other important matters, too, such as the need for better training of fertilizer salesmen, the role of "secondary" and trace elements in crop nutrition, and the importance of actually showing farmers how to profit from fertilizer use. It is not enough, says Thomas, to tell a farmer that more fertilizer means more bushels per acre. The superior fertilizer salesman will show his customer how to use fertilizer for more efficient production of higher quality crops, and will help him arrive at a properly balanced farming program—with maximum profit potential. This may mean, for example, recommending that the corn producer become a cattle feeder, also, to upgrade his basic product—corn—and increase the over-all return on his investment.

Thomas has had occasion to view the subject of plant food use from nearly every angle. As a youth on his father's Indiana farm, he became fascinated with questions of why soils behave as they do, and how they respond to various treatments. While still in high school he had decided to major in soils at college, and on the advice of a helpful county agent went to the University of Illinois to study under the renowned Cyril G. Hopkins. After earning his B.S. he spent five years on the university staff, overseeing work at the soils experimental fields throughout the state. During the winter months, he also did some teaching and laboratory research in soil fertility.

Proceeding to Iowa State College, Thomas earned an M.S. Then, on a legislative fellowship provided for a special tobacco investigation, he moved on to the University of Wisconsin. There, while working for his Ph.D. under another famous soil scien-

tist, Emil Truog, he delved into the causes of brown root rot of tobacco (which he did not then and still does not use). Thomas showed the "disease" to be largely a plant food problem. Microorganisms in soil where large amounts of organic residue had been turned under were, in their labors to decompose the residues, robbing the tobacco roots of nitrogen. Thomas showed that application of a good high-nitrogen fertilizer eliminated the problem.

In 1928, Thomas was appointed associate professor of soils at the University of Maryland. He remained for 23 years, during which he headed the university's soils research program, was later in charge of soils teaching, and coordinated the state soil surveys. He became a full professor in 1937.

Throughout his career at Maryland, Thomas had maintained fairly close contact with the fertilizer industry, chiefly in the role of advisor. Having developed a strong interest in plant foods beyond the standard N-P-K triumvirate, but lacking the facilities he wanted to intensify his research on other plant nutrients, he was persuaded in 1950 that he could increase the effectiveness of his contributions by shifting to an industry position. It was then that he joined IMC, with which he had had some previous contact, and which had been recommended to him as a progressive organization, interested in advancing plant food science and technology.

Among his diverse duties at IMC, Thomas promotes—through every device available—greater appreciation on the part of his company's salesmen for the true agronomic value of fertilizers. Salesmen turn to him for help in providing greater service to fertilizer users, and for technical assistance when an occasional field application fails to give the expected results.

At the manufacturing end, Thomas often advises on formulations, especially from the agronomic viewpoint. He may recommend the addition of new grades to the company's line, when field work indicates that new grades are necessary or desirable.

Because of the breadth of his interests and experience, Thomas serves as the plant food division's contact man in most of its relationships with universities, scientific societies, trade associa-



Royle P. Thomas

Born Sept. 26, 1897, Sullivan, Ind. U. of Ill., B.S. in agriculture, 1919; Iowa State College, M.S. in soils 1925; W. of Wis. Ph.D. in soils, 1928. U. of Ill., soils dept. experimental fields, 1919-24. U. of Md., assoc. prof. of soils, 1928-37; prof. 1937-50. International Minerals & Chemical, technical service supervisor and agronomist, 1950—to date.

tions, and government agencies. He has had an active part in establishing and maintaining good liaison between the industry and state control officials.

Through his interest in nutrients beyond N, P, and K, Thomas has been instrumental in getting IMC into the minor element field. The company's minor element mixture (trademarked MEM) is derived from mineral ores, concentrated and upgraded to a content of 40% essential nutrients, on an elemental basis. A "shotgun" type mixture of all minor elements, the material is added to regular fertilizer formulations. Thomas also babied along the company's new Thrive, a specialty product for home and garden use, with minor elements added.

As a further result of his trace elements work, Thomas has been chairman for many years of the subcommittee on trace elements, National Committee on Fertilizer Application. Other industry committee memberships have included those on soil testing and fertilizer ratio and grade committees for the Soil Science Society and American Society of Agronomy. He is also a member of the research and education committee of the NPFI, and regional chairman of that committee for the Midwest. He holds memberships in the ACS, American Society of Agronomy, Soil Science Society, and several honorary societies. He is one of a select few soil scientists holding the rank of Fellow in the AAAS.