

The sun goes down on SOPIB

After more than 20 years actively promoting the benefits of sulphate of potash (SOP) fertilizer, the Sulphate of Potash Information Board (SOPIB) will cease its scientific and promotional activities at the end of 2018.

SOPIB was originally formed back in 1997 under the initiative of four of the world's key SOP producers: Tessenderlo Group in Belgium, K+S Kali in Germany, SQM in Chile and Compass Minerals in the USA. Their idea was that SOPIB would develop and promote the latest findings on the agronomic and economic advantages of SOP for a global agriculture.

During the course of its existence, the SOPIB agronomy team has conducted more than 30 projects with field trials in 11 different countries on a broad range of cash and specialty crops to examine the potential benefits of SOP compared to other commonly used potash sources. These research projects were conducted in collaboration with many prestigious research centers across the globe.

Soon after results from trials begun to show SOP benefits on different crops and cropping conditions, it was decided to develop a SOPIB website in English and Spanish languages. The website was developed to complement traditional mostly written communication systems and to reach a much broader audience across countries and continents. To make the website more useful different types of information on soils, water and plant nutrition was included.

In addition, SOPIB released periodic electronic newsletters emphasizing the importance and improved use of potassium and sulfur fertilization in main cereals, fruits, and vegetables to improve yield under a wide range of growing conditions. Also, annual bulletins on a specific value crop was released annually with detailed information of crop management practices.

Three years ago, the culmination of all this research along with the expertise and knowledge of the agronomic committee was published in the book 'The Use of Sulphate of Potash Fertilizer: Principles and Practices'. An electronic version of the book can be downloaded from the SOPIB website at <http://www.sopib.com/the-use-of-potassium-sulfate-fertilizer-principles-and-practices.html>.

In 2003 the SOPIB also introduced the SOPIB prize which, since then every two years, has been awarded for an outstanding contribution in the field of agronomic research on SOP. A list of recipients is shown in the table below.

Year	Recipient	Country
2003	Dr S. Bansal	India
2005		

Prof. M. Malakouti
Iran

2007
Dr M. Abd El Hadi et Dr M. El Kadi
Egypt

2009
Prof. P. Brown
USA

2011
Dr J. Quaggio
Brazil

2013
Prof. D. Ma
China

2015
Dr R. Melgar
Argentina

2017
Prof. D. Anaç
Turkey

A key part of SOPIB's mission was to promote the findings of its research projects as widely as possible and the agronomists organized many local events to communicate the results of its trials. Three road shows were organized in China (2000), Peru (2005) and India (2006) involving the full agronomy team, with 5 or 6 seminars for each country. Alongside this, many workshops were also organized. A summary is given in the table below:

Year
Country
Crop

1999
Brazil
Various

2002
Vietnam
Fruit

2004
China
Tea

2004

China (Anhui)
Vegetables

2008
China (Shandong)
Grapes

2009
China (Xinjiang)
Cotton & grapes

2012
Vietnam
Rice

2014
Argentina
Salinity

2015
Australia
Salinity

The work of SOPIB has indeed made a valuable contribution to a better understanding of the uses and benefits of SOP in global agriculture. During the course of the last 15 years the global consumption of SOP has doubled from 3.3 million MT in 2003 to a forecasted consumption (by independent experts) of 6.7 to 7 million MT in 2018. This increase represents an annual growth rate of 5% over the period, which proves without a doubt that SOP remains a valuable potash source, particularly for crops sensitive to chloride and in regions where there is a risk of salinity or under water stress conditions.

Despite the success of SOPIB, times change and it was therefore after a great deal of reflection and with regret that SOPIB's board of directors voted to bring to an end the SOPIB institution at the end of this year. Over the last decade communication methods and channels have evolved as has the global SOP market, which has seen many new producers appearing on the scene. In addition, the SOPIB member organizations have also seen their own strategies and product portfolios evolve and change in response to the needs of the market. It is primarily for these reasons that the remaining members (Compass Minerals left SOPIB at the end of 2017) have chosen to go their independent ways to develop and promote SOP in future, rather than through the combined efforts of the SOPIB.

This issue will be the final SOPIB newsletter and the website (www.sopib.org) will remain online until the end of 2018 to allow those interested to capture the information it contains. In closing, the board of directors and the agronomic committee would like to sincerely thank all those who over the years have collaborated with SOPIB, both in research and in communicating the benefits of SOP to a truly worldwide audience. As the global population continues to grow and water scarcity increases the challenge in the coming decades for farmers will be to produce more food from less water and with improved fertilizer use efficiency. It is sure that SOP will remain an important chloride free potash source for global agriculture.

