Calibrating Pesticide Application Equipment

by Cecil I. Tharp, Pesticide Education Specialist

Improperly calibrated pesticide equipment may cause either too little or too much pesticide to be applied. This can be averted with an organized approach to calibration that includes ample time, the correct tools, and a fundamental understanding of calibration.

Pre-Calibration Checklist

Immediately prior to calibration give your equipment a thorough inspection. Check pumps, lines, and fittings for leaks while assessing entire sprayer for wear, severe rust, or breakage. It is also important to understand your field speed, nozzle flow rate, desired pressure, and how to assess spray coverage.

1. Know your field speed. Your speed of application is critical when calibrating your sprayer. Ideal speeds generally are a balance between safety and maximizing ground covered. Safety can be a factor when traveling too fast over uneven terrain or obstacles. If you do not have a speedometer, you may mark a 300 foot course and drive at a normal spraying speed (tank 1/4 full) while timing. Repeat this 2-3 times and calculate average time. Convert to miles per hour (MPH) using this formula:

   \[
   \text{MILES PER HOUR} = \frac{\text{DISTANCE (feet)} \times 60}{\text{TIME (seconds)} \times 88}
   \]

2. Selecting Nozzle Flow Rate. The selection of the appropriate nozzles can be one of the most critical steps to any calibration process. Remember to purchase and use only nozzles which are correct for your application. The recommended sprayer output in gallons per acre (GPA) that your sprayer should be applying can be obtained from your pesticide product label. You can use this to attain your nozzle flow rate (gallons per minute) with the 5940 equation.

   Use the 5940 equation when determining nozzle flow rate. The 5940 equation makes it easy to find desired nozzles for a recommended GPA. Use your product label recommendation in the following equation:

   \[
   \text{GALLONS PER MINUTE} = \frac{\text{GPA} \times \text{MPH} \times W}{5940}
   \]

   \(\text{GPA} = \text{Sprayer Output (Gallons per acre);} \ \text{MPH} = \text{Sprayer speed (Miles per hour)}\)

   \(W = \text{Nozzle spacing in inches}\)
This will tell you the flow rate for each nozzle on your sprayer. Use this as a guide when purchasing nozzles. Fine tune your nozzle flow rate by making slight adjustments to spray pressure.

3. Spray Pressure. Recommended spray pressure varies by product, so read the label carefully. Increasing pressure raises the flow rate while lower pressures decreases flow rate. To double flow rate you must increase your pressure by 4 times. Droplet size can also be controlled by pressure. Less than 30 pounds per square inch (PSI) of pressure are often needed for low drift nozzles due to the much larger droplets produced. High pressures present greater risks of drift due to smaller droplet size. Certain nozzles including the ‘Extended Range (XR) Flat Fan nozzles’ can be used in a wide range of pressures (15-60 PSI) thus minimizing drift, while many of the standard fan nozzles can be used in only 30-60 PSI. The newer ‘air induction’ nozzles create larger droplets which minimize drift under higher pressures (40-100 PSI). Pressure should never be altered to make large changes in sprayer output. However it can be useful in making minor adjustments.

4. Assessing Spray Coverage (Area). To calibrate your equipment or to assess the amount of pesticide needed for a routine spray you will need to determine area. Formulas may be used to determine the area of a rectangle, triangle, or circle. (Figures 1-3, below)

Converting to Acres: It can often be desirable to convert area (sq. ft) to acres. This can be accomplished with this formula:

\[
\text{AREA IN ACRES} = \frac{\text{Area in square feet}}{43,560 \text{ feet}}
\]

For example if you are covering 3,000 square feet this can be easily converted to acres:

Area in Acres = \(\frac{3,000}{43,560} = 0.0688\) Acres

Testing Uniformity of Nozzles
Accurate calibration is a combination of assessing uniform nozzle flow, determining the output rate of your sprayer, and properly mixing your tank. You should always start off by checking all nozzles on spray booms for uniformity. Nozzles may be worn or damaged, preventing uniform spray coverage. All nozzle across a boom need to be applying the same amount of liquid within a certain error range (usually 10 percent on either side of average). Clean and/or replace any nozzles that fall outside of the error range. When assessing nozzle uniformity follow these steps:

- Collect water from each nozzle for 1 minute. Measure volume.
- Determine average nozzle output.
- Determine the acceptable error range (usually within 10 percent).
- Replace or clean nozzles outside of range and re-test.

Example. You have a 5 nozzle boom and have collected water from each nozzle for 1 minute. You note the following outputs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nozzle</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ounces</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>143.0 ounces</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average Nozzle Output = \(\frac{143}{5} = 28.6\) oz.

Find your 10 percent range: 28.6 x 0.10 = 2.86 oz. to add and subtract from the average. Your range is 25.74 to 31.46 ounces.

FIGURE 1. Rectangle The area of a rectangle can be found by multiplying the length times the width. This is the most commonly used formula when applying pesticides and when calibrating sprayers. Length \(\times\) Width = Area

\(15\times10 = 150\) square feet

FIGURE 2. Triangle The area of a triangle can be assessed by multiplying \(\frac{1}{2}\) the base times the height. (Base \(\times\) Height) \(\div 2 =\) Area

\((25\times20) \div 2 = 250\) square feet

FIGURE 3. Circle The area of a circle can be assessed by multiplying 3.14 times the radius (\(\frac{1}{2}\) the diameter) squared. 3.14 \(\times r^2 =\) Area

3.14 \(\times (50\times50) = 7,850\) square feet
Calibration of Output (GPA)
If you have determined that your sprayer has uniform nozzle flow rates, then you may determine your actual sprayer output (GPA). Your target output is determined on the pesticide product label. By following the pre-calibration checklist, an applicator should have the appropriate nozzles, pressure, and speed to attain this. The GPA of your sprayer must be assessed while taking into account pressure, nozzle flow rate, and speed in an actual spray setting.

**Backpack Sprayers**
Backpack sprayers also need to be calibrated annually. Follow these steps to assess output of your backpack sprayer. Follow these steps to assess output:

- Establish Spray Strip Dimensions: Nozzle spacing (feet) x Test Strip Distance. (example: Nozzle spacing is 3 feet and your test strip is 200 ft long.)
- Convert to area. Length x Width = Area of Rectangle (example: 3 ft x 200 ft = 600 square feet)
- Convert to acres. Square feet in test strip + 43,560 square feet = Area (example: 600 + 43,560 = 0.0137 Acres)
- Spray the test strip while measuring time. (example: 27 seconds to spray the 0.0137 acre test strip)
- Collect and measure liquid from 1 nozzle (example: in 27 seconds collected 1.1 gallon from 1 nozzle or 1 broadjet)
- Determine GPA. Gallons applied to test strip + Test Strip Area = GPA (example: 1.1 gallon + 0.0137 = 80.29 GPA)

**Boom or Broadspray Sprayers**
The longhand method of calibration enables the assessment of output for backpack sprayers, hand gun, boom, and broadjet applications. Be sure that you have verified uniformity of your nozzles prior to assessing output of your boom sprayer. Follow these steps to assess output:

- Establish Spray Strip Dimensions: Nozzle spacing (feet) x Test Strip Distance. (example: Nozzle spacing is 3 feet and your test strip is 200 ft long.)
- Convert to area. Length x Width = Area of Rectangle (example: 3 ft x 200 ft = 600 square feet)
- Convert to acres. Square feet in test strip + 43,560 square feet = Area (example: 600 + 43,560 = 0.0137 Acres)
- Spray the test strip while measuring time. (example: 15 seconds to spray the 0.0137 acre test strip)
- Collect and measure liquid from 1 nozzle (example: in 15 seconds collected 1 gallon from 1 nozzle or 1 boomjet)
- Determine GPA. Gallons applied to test strip + Test Strip Area = GPA (example: 1 gallon + 0.0137 = 72.9 GPA)

CONVERSIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Multiply:</th>
<th>By:</th>
<th>To Get:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acres</td>
<td>43,560</td>
<td>Square Feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cups</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ounces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallons</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>Ounces</td>
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<td>Kilograms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Ounces</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
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</tr>
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<td>Miles/Minute</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ounces</td>
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<td>Tablespoons</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Gallons</td>
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<tr>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Ounces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarts</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Ounces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tablespoon</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>Ounces</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Proper Tank Mixing
Proper tank mixing takes place once you understand your sprayer's output, the number of acres you wish to spray, and product rate, which is expressed on the label.

Determine Area You Can Expect to Cover
To determine how much product or solution to add to the tank, you must understand how much area your spray tank can cover. If the tank can not hold enough solution to cover your intended application, it will be necessary to have two or more separate applications. To determine the area you can expect to cover follow this formula.

\[
\text{SPRAYABLE ACRES} = \frac{\text{Gallons in Tank}}{\text{Gallons per Acre (GPA)}}
\]

For example, if your sprayer was calibrated at 30 GPA and your spray tank holds 500 gallons you could spray 16.6 acres (500 ÷ 30 = 16.6 acres).

Determine Amount of Solution to mix
When determining the amount of spray mixture needed in a spray tank simply follow this formula:

\[
\text{SPRAY MIX NEEDED} = \text{GPA} \times \text{sprayed acres}
\]

If your sprayer was calibrated at 30 GPA and you needed to spray 15 acres you would need 450 gallons of spray mixture (30 x 15 = 450 gallons).

Determine Amount of Product to add to Tank
An applicator should read the product label to determine the amount of pesticide product to deliver over a given area. This formula will convert this recommendation to the amount of pesticide product to add to your tank.

\[
\text{PRODUCT TO ADD} = \text{Acres to spray} \times \text{product rate}
\]

For example, if you are spraying 15 acres and your product rate is 4 oz per acre you would need to add 60 ounces to your spray tank (15 x 4 = 60 ounces).

Winterizing your Spray Equipment
Spray equipment should be winterized prior to storage. This can save time and money in the long run. Always remember to drain your system and pumps prior to running antifreeze into your pumps.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Ruth O'Neill (MSU Research Associate), Dave Brink (MSU Mineral County Extension Agent), and Marko Manoukian (MSU Phillips County Extension Agent) for their insight in creating this MontGuide.

For Further Information
Additional resources are available online at [www.pesticides.montana.edu](http://www.pesticides.montana.edu) and clicking on 'Reference Materials'. You may also contact your local Montana State University Extension Office or the MSU Pesticide Education Program:

- **Pesticide Education Program**
  - 119 Linfield Hall
  - Montana State University
  - Bozeman, MT 59717
  - Web: [www.pesticides.montana.edu](http://www.pesticides.montana.edu)
  - Email: pesticides@montana.edu
  - Phone: (406)994-5067

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