



Choosing A Nutrient Management Planner

Do you need a nutrient management plan for your operation? In recent years, Pennsylvania livestock producers have faced increasing environmental challenges, particularly the need for nutrient management planning. While farmers in Pennsylvania have the option of becoming certified to develop their own nutrient management plans, the complexity and time required cause most producers to hire a professional nutrient management planner.

In addition to the nutrient management planner, these plans may require the assistance of other professional consultants: crop consultant, engineer and lawyer. This brief article will focus on identifying and selecting a certified nutrient management specialist.

Nutrient management plans in Pennsylvania are not intended to be a one-shot and done process just to meet regulatory requirements. Plans require recordkeeping, an annual review and a review of the plan every three years to determine if the plan still reflects the management on the operation. It is common that these reviews will initiate a need to update the plan. Therefore, it will be beneficial and necessary to develop a long-term relationship with a certified nutrient management specialist. How do you choose a specialist best suited for your operation and needs?

Find the Best

You will increase your chances of finding the right professional for your specific operation, if you put some thought and planning effort into the selection process. Invest as much into this decision as your other management decisions, such as purchasing a piece of equipment or selecting a nutritionist. The key is knowing what you want to accomplish. Do you simply want the specialist to develop the nutrient management plan or do you also want this individual to provide additional crop consulting services.

Determine Qualifications

Only consider individuals who have been certified as nutrient management specialists in Pennsylvania through the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. A list of certified individuals is available through each county Conservation District office. This list can also be accessed on the Internet at:
http://panutrientmgmt.cas.psu.edu/nms_note.htm.

Obtain Recommendations

Talk with other farmers in your area who have had nutrient management plans developed for their operations. Ask the nutrient management staff from your local Conservation District for their perspective.

Interview Face-to-Face

Take the time to meet personally with two or three who have risen to the top of your short list.

Years of experience, number of plans developed, and experience with your type of operation can vary greatly among specialists. It is important to explore these aspects when interviewing prospective planners. Planning approach will also vary among planners. Insist on planners that will spend time with you on the farm. Are they willing to work with other professionals, such as engineers, who might be integral to the development and implementation of a nutrient management plan?

Ask specialists for references from other farmers with whom they have worked.

Determine Cost

Most operators will ask this question first, and that is understandable. I intentionally listed this last for two reasons. First, cost is relative when comparing specialists in light of the information obtained above. Secondly, it is critical to determine what is included in the price quoted. Does the price cover just plan development or does it include related expenses such as soil and manure sampling and testing. Will there be additional charges for plan reviews and updates? Are they able and willing to obtain necessary permits? If so, what charges will accompany these additional items?

Once You Hire

After you have chosen your certified nutrient management specialist, ask for a complete written proposal. A clear detailed statement of what the specialist will do for you will prevent problems and confusion over responsibilities and expectations later. It should include:

- Specific duties and responsibilities for each party in the agreement.
- Fee structure.
- Time schedule.

In Conclusion

The process of selecting a nutrient management planner clearly takes an investment of time and thought. By considering and following the suggestions outlined above, you will increase the probability of securing the services of a reliable and valuable consultant to your operation. In addition, you are more likely to obtain a nutrient management plan that you understand and can confidently implement.