

A New Spin on Nutrient Management Education

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In the March 2006 edition of “The Tree” you read about the Nutrient Management Farmer Training curriculum, which teaches producers to develop their own nutrient management plan using a mix of classroom training and on-farm assistance. This program is available to farmers throughout the state, but in the Upper Rock River Basin there is a slightly different approach in place. While the training is conducted by Extension and Discovery Farms staff, it is local fertilizer dealers and crop consultants who promote and deliver the program and work with producers on the development of the actual nutrient management plan.

Fertilizer dealers and crop consultants recruit their farmer clients to participate in the program and see to it that each operation has current soil tests, conservation plans, and manure spreading maps before attending the classroom training. Staff from Discovery Farms and the Dodge County Extension office conduct the classroom portion of the program and do the on-farm visit to calibrate the manure spreading equipment. The local Land Conservation Departments (Fond du Lac and Dodge County) review and update the conservation plans and the manure spreading restriction maps. Once the farmers have completed the classroom training, the fertilizer dealers and consultants work one-on-one with the farmer to prepare a nutrient management plan.

The idea behind this program is that crop consultants and fertilizer dealers have more frequent contact with the producers and will assist with the implementation of the nutrient management plan if they are involved in developing the plan. Fertilizer dealers and crop consultants receive \$6/acre for the initial plans they help prepare. This program also goes beyond the initial development of the nutrient management plan and provides a \$2/acre incentive payment to update the plan in years two and three of the program. In order to receive payment, all plans must be completed and turned in by March 31st of the current year. Farmers are recruited for the program 6 months to a year in advance of the classroom training. This allows time for soil sampling, manure spread calibration, as well as preparation of conservation plans and manure spreading maps. When farmers come to the classroom training (which is held in December and January), they have everything they need to begin preparing their nutrient management plans. The classroom training covers crop nutrient needs, legume and manure credits, manure spreading strategies, and the rules and regulations outlined in the Nutrient Management 590 Standard. Emphasis is on preparing a plan that is simple to follow, because when farmers write their own plans; they are more likely to follow them.

Over the last two years, 55 farmers in Dodge and Fond du Lac counties, representing approximately 23,000 acres, have prepared nutrient management plans through this program. In year two, fifteen of the farmers updated their plans, representing 5,400 acres. Seven fertilizer dealers/consultants participated in this program. Several of the fertilizer dealers wrote nutrient management plans for the first time.

Seven fertilizer dealers from Dodge and Fond du Lac counties were surveyed prior to this program regarding the preparation of nutrient management plans. All of them stated that nutrient management planning was a service they wanted to offer. Three of them thought it was a profitable service, two thought it was not profitable, and two of them did not know if it was profitable. Fertilizer dealers cited the greatest challenges in developing nutrient management plans were:

1. Not having enough time to soil sample
2. Getting conservation plans completed in a timely manner
3. Not having enough staff to devote to preparing plans

Recruiting farmers 6-12 months in advance of the classroom training helped dealers as well as agency staff manage the added workload. Having farmers, fertilizer dealers, crop consultants, and agency staff all in the training together allowed for a lively, free flow of information, and helped to build better communications between all who have a stake in nutrient management at the local level.

Another unique part of this program is that funding is made available through a partnership between the Sand County Foundation, the Discovery Farms Program and the Natural Resources and Conservation Service. Sand County Foundation is a private conservation organization based in Madison, Wisconsin. It operates and organizes projects focused on improving the condition of privately owned land and the welfare of the people living on it. With its guiding spirit, the naturalist Aldo Leopold, Sand County Foundation believes that conservation is sustainable only if it benefits the landowner, and that landowners prosper best when they practice conservation.