

Director's Column-Reflecting on the Past Year

We are only a few weeks from the start of a new year and I don't know about you, but I'm ready. This past year was full of challenges for people working with agriculture on environmental issues. I thought in my column this time I would summarize where we are on those issues.

In 2005 we had three rule packages brought out for public hearings and comment (siting, nutrient management and the permit rules). The siting rules have gone through several public hearings; they were approved by the DATCP board in September and are in the process of being finalized. This rule package did not get done in 2005, and in reality, it will be a work in progress over the next several years. Everyone needs to keep an eye on these rules and work together to improve the siting of livestock facilities in Wisconsin.

We also had hearings on ATCP 50 and the nutrient management standard. These hearings had very good attendance. The comments should have provided the state agencies with guidelines to improve these rules. These hearings were held last spring. DATCP has been working with producer groups for the past several months to improve these rules. It appears that these standards will be taken to the DATCP board sometime in early 2006.

NR-243 provides guidance for farms over 1,000 animal units. The rules have undergone major revisions this year. These rules went out for public hearing and DNR is making revisions to this standard. It is my understanding that these rules should be ready for approval sometime in early 2006.

The state also established a manure management task force which developed recommendations for how manure should be handled in the state. The task force held informational meetings to gather public comments in mid-December. As you can see, 2005 was a year with a lot of proposed changes to rules affecting agriculture. While none of these rules are finished, each has made significant progress and should be finished sometime in 2006.

Now you know why I'm looking forward to a new year. My opinion is that these rules provide good guidance, but they are meaningless without adoption and implementation. A key point to keep in mind is the goal should never be to get more rules or even better rules. The goal is to protect and improve our air and water while maintaining a strong and healthy agricultural system. Rules help achieve the goal, but in and of themselves they are not the goal. Sometimes I think people have forgotten why we are working on these rule packages. They get into generating more paperwork and forget that without implementation the paperwork is useless.

It's like building a new house; you need a blueprint that lays out design, engineering and structure of the building. The blueprint only provides guidance to the contractor building the house. The builder has to take these prints and modify them on the job site to create the building. There are many modifications to the plans during the construction phase and the contractor makes these decisions every day on the job site. That's exactly what happens on a farm with a nutrient management plan or any other plan. Farmers need to have the knowledge, understanding and freedom to make modifications on the fly to implement their plans. Our job is to educate and work with producers to make sure they make the correct decisions.

Wishing you and yours a Happy Holiday Season and a joyous New Year!