

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION TO AVOID AGRONOMIC PROBLEMS RELATED TO CUSTOM MANURE APPLICATION

Panel Members: Tim Ranson¹, Ernie Sundstrom², Brandon Vogel³
Moderator: Kevin Erb⁴

Applying just over 3 billion gallons of liquid manure annually, Wisconsin's 119 for-hire manure applicators are a key component when it comes to implementing the 590 nutrient management plans you write. Yet to the typical professional applicator, the plans they receive from the farmer are hard to interpret and implement. The Professional Nutrient Applicators Association (PNAAW) and UW Extension surveyed Wisconsin's applicators in the summer of 2007, and more than half of the applicators gave us their opinion of the industry, its needs, nutrient management plans, and the future.

Looking at the more than 2,500 farms served by the professional applicators, the farmer or their CCA is determining the application rate 79% of the time—the rest of the time the applicator is making the rate determination. Often, the rate a CCA provides is not the rate the farmer tells the applicator. Twenty percent of the applicators say they have never seen a nutrient management plan, and the vast majority see a plan on only a handful of their farmer clients—usually the CAFOs.

Another concern cited by the applicators in the survey was the lack of understanding by plan writers of the capabilities of their equipment. Lower application rates can dramatically increase application costs (mileage/fuel/time for tractors and tankers, wear & tear on equipment and setup time for dragline). The lowest practical application rate ranged from 2,500 gal/acre for tankers to 10,000 gal/acre for dragline operations. Applicators prefer consistent, reasonable rates (not 8,289 gal/acre on this field, 11,000 on the next, 6,686 on the third and 11,800 on the fourth).

The top suggestions from the survey and the PNAAW board include:

1. **Give the farmer a boiled down plan to give to the applicator.** *Handing an applicator their own copy of a - inch binder is not an efficient use of time or resources.* At a minimum, the boiled down copy should include:
 - a. Basic field maps with field names clearly identified.
 - b. Field by field breakdown of rate to be applied and basic field information.
2. **Highlight basic field information.**
 - a. Restrictions that may be in effect (incorporation, no frozen soil application, etc).
 - b. Mark hazard areas (tile inlets, streams, wells) not only on field planned, but in neighboring fields/road ditches as well.
3. **Talk to the applicator when writing the plan.** Find out:
 - a. What the equipment limitations are.
 - b. What are the most efficient rates of application.

¹ Tim Ransom, co-owner, T-K Ag Works, Darien, WI 608.676.5218

² Ernie Sundstrom, co-owner, Sundstrom's Pit Pumping, Colfax, WI 715.962.4061

³ Brandon Vogel, co-owner, Right Way Applications, Reedsville, WI 920.901.0192

⁴ Kevin Erb, CCA, UW Extension, Green Bay, WI 920.391.4652

- c. Ask if the applicator wants a boiled down copy of the plan for the crew chief, or a copy for each driver.
4. **Note conservation information.** If the field needs 30% residue or is no-till, let the applicator know so they can help keep the farmer in compliance.
5. **Early communication is essential.** Providing the information to the applicator a few weeks before the pumping date increases the chances of the plan being followed (rather than the farmer trying to find it at 6 pm on a Friday night). Several suggested providing maps to applicators on CD a month or two before application begins.
6. **Help the farmer choose an applicator based on their ability to do the job right.** The best applicators have a niche – some offer as applied GPS mapping of applications, others focus on their capability do the job quickly to minimize neighbor concerns, and others pride themselves on never having any manure spilled on the outside of the tanker. If your plan calls for manure to be injected but the applicator does not have the right equipment, there may be a problem down the road.

When asked “What could Nutrient Management Plan writers do to make your job easier,” applicator responses included:

- Need to see one first before I can answer this question.
- Have not seen one.
- Don’t know - No clients have given us a plan to look at.
- Make sure I get to see the plans.
- Tell the farmers to give us the plans.
- Farmer tells us, “This is what my plan calls for.” We probably won't see the plan.
- Make plans simple.
- Better maps, more defined.
- They could help by suggesting manure storage facilities and by helping to eliminate winter spreading.
- Better communication.
- Standardize maps and recommendations.
- Give fields a number and then give the rate next to the field number.
- Make the field maps larger i.e. one or two fields per page instead of 20 or 30.
- Give us rates and fields.
- Simple plans.
- Use more common sense.
- Better maps (a universal map system) some farms are easier to read.
- Have the hauler in on meeting with producer and plan writer.
- Provide all applicators with maps with acreage and rates (legible).
- It would be nice if they gave us a specific rate for each field.
- Do more on follow-ups, post application.
- I think what is lacking in a professional nutrient management plan is the cost benefits of applying manure where soil fertility levels are low as opposed to the lowest cost of pumping out the pit. Generally spending money to put manure further out (show me the money, the cost benefit). This will provide several critical things: (1) a solution. Our customers hire us to solve problems. (2) showing this cost benefit gives a client the thought, which is the first step.

About the Association

The Professional Nutrient Applicators Association of Wisconsin is the professional trade association of Wisconsin's manure applicators. Resources available to nutrient management plan writers can be found on the www.wimanuremgt.org website, and include:

- County by county summary of the regulations
- Cost of application by distance calculators
- Listing of members and their certification status
- Updates on association projects, including the Upper Midwest Manure Handling Expo, live action manure spill response demonstrations, and the regional farm equipment road weight study

2007 PNAAW membership map

