Choosing a Nutrient Management Planner

Pennsylvania agricultural operations that are designated Concentrated Animal Operations (CAOs) or Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) are required to develop and implement an approved nutrient management plan (plans). Plans must be written by certified nutrient management specialists. In order to verify that the plan meets the requirements of Act 38, Pennsylvania’s nutrient management law, it is submitted to the county Conservation District for review and approval.

Nutrient management planning in Pennsylvania is not a one-shot and done process. Act 38 planning requires an annual plan for each crop year, annual recordkeeping, annual manure sampling, and new soil tests every three years. Annual plans must be updated to reflect management changes on the operation and the new information provided by the farm records and the manure and soil testing programs. Therefore, it will be beneficial and necessary to develop a long-term relationship with a certified nutrient management specialist.

The following considerations will provide guidance in evaluating and selecting the certified nutrient management 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 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 or veterinarian.

What Services?
Before contacting planners it is important to determine what nutrient management planning services you want the specialist to provide. Planning will require soil sampling, manure sampling, manure spreader calibration, and plan writing. Do you want the planner to provide all these services, or will you handle the sampling and calibration? Also, do you simply want a plan, or would you like the planner to provide additional crop consulting services?

Determine Qualifications
Only consider individuals who have been certified by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture as Act 38 nutrient management specialists. A list of certified individuals is available through each county Conservation District office. This list can also be accessed on the Internet at: https://www.paplants.state.pa.us/NOMHB/NOMHBServiceAreaSearch.aspx.

Obtain Farmer Recommendations
One of the best ways to find a reputable and reliable planner is to talk with other farmers in your area who have had nutrient management plans developed for their operations. Ask them pointed questions about their experience with their planner:

• What services do they provide and what do they charge for these services?
• Are they timely in submitting plans and updates to meet required deadlines?
• Did they submit quality plans that required minimal corrections and moved quickly through the review process?
• Did they meet with you personally to review the plan so that you understood what was in the plan and what was required to implement it?
• Are they responsive to requests for information or guidance on implementing the plan?

These questions should be rephrased and asked of the planners when you interview them.

Interview Prospective Planners
Take the time to personally interview two or three planners who have risen to the top of your short list and do not hesitate to ask pointed questions such as:
• How many years have you been writing Act 38 plans and how many have you written?
• How many plans have you written for my type of operation?
• Have you written plans for other farms in my county? Can I contact them?
• Do you have a good working relationship with the Conservation District in my county?
• Does your company employ, or are you willing to work with other professionals, such as engineers, who might be integral to the development and implementation of a nutrient management plan?

In addition, rephrase and ask the farmer recommendation questions above.

Determine Cost
Most operators will ask this question first, and that is understandable. However, cost is relative when comparing specialists in light of the recommendation and interview information obtained above. Also, it is critical to determine what planning services are included in the prices quoted. Obtain quotes for the development of the initial plan through entire process of plan writing, submission, review and final approval. Ensure that there will be no hidden or surprise expenses. In addition, obtain cost quotes for future plan updates and amendments.

Before You Hire
After you have selected a certified nutrient management specialist, ask for a complete written proposal. A clear detailed statement of the services agreed upon will prevent confusion and problems later. This agreement should include:
• Specific duties and responsibilities for both you and the planner.
• Fee structure; including when payment will be made for a final approved plan.
• Time schedule; including the specific date that the plan will be submitted for review.

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.