

IV Recommendations

Focus Groups: selected key findings

Questionnaire: key findings

Other recommendations

These are the preliminary recommendations of the author. It is suggested that they might be used as a starting point for further discussions within Extension and between Extension and its partner institutions.

Focus Groups: selected key findings

1. Variability and availability and the consequences

The variability in open lot and other solid manure and in the first and second year availability of nutrients, makes it difficult to apply at rates that closely match crop needs.

Implications and recommendations for Extension and partners

- More on-farm nutrient rate demonstrations or experiments are needed, especially in parts of the state that are not well represented by Experiment Stations
- Additional on-going or periodic, timely outreach (e.g., newsletter pieces) is needed to help producers to better consider the factors that affect nutrient availability and incorporate them in their decision making
- Ultimately, to fine tune manure applications and nutrient management, more data or tools (in-field experiments or modeling software) will be needed so that producers and consultants can better estimate nutrient availability based on weather and other factors
- There will be a continuing tendency to over apply 'commercial' fertilizer in order to achieve higher yields. Helping producers to be more confident in their estimates of nutrient availability (as per the preceding three items) is part of the solution. Other strategies, such as 'nutrient insurance' should be identified, explored, and implemented.
- For some, the variability in the manure seems to mean that it's not practical to keep records, to test the material, and so on. They have to learn to recognize that there is variability and note such in the plan—that will go a long way with regulators. Complaining about variability and using that as an excuse to not keep records is not going to be accepted by regulators. A part of this group of farmers could be successfully targeted for EQIP funds for building storage. Some of them will not want to make the investment. Some won't be in business long enough to make it a worthwhile investment from the taxpayers' perspective. How else can Extension address this problem? If this problem will 'go away' due to attrition, is it worth expending much effort in targeting the producers involved?

2. Spreader calibration: promote, provide, and assist

Many of the producers who spread their own solid manure, need and request on-farm assistance with weighing their manure wagons/spreaders.

Implications and recommendations for Extension and partners

- On a comprehensive, statewide basis (perhaps through a rotating, regional or area process):
 - determine present availability of or accessibility to scales
 - identify counties or areas in need of scales
 - characterize local staff resources for assisting with calibration
 - develop and implement plans to redress deficiencies
 - develop and implement an outreach and communications plan

- The above recommendation will address the producers who are interested—who recognize a need to do calibration. Other approaches must be taken in order to effect change among producers who do not think it is practical or worthwhile to calibrate their spreaders. Some of these producers could be ‘reached’ through efforts that focus on the economic benefits that would be realized (for the situations where such an argument could be convincingly made). Accordingly, Extension should consider developing materials and implementing communications strategies to support an approach based on financial arguments.

3. Manure application record keeping forms are needed

Producers who apply their own solid manure, need and want suitable forms for field-by-field record keeping.

Implications and recommendations for Extension and partners

- A number of different record keeping tools should be developed (or adapted), tested, and made available.
 - Provide various format options (e.g., pocket size, full size, spreadsheet)
 - Provide options that address different needs (e.g., recording a day’s field applications, making year-to-year comparisons)

Note: Although ‘record keeping form’ was one of the most frequently and extensively made suggestions, it was not something that came up again very much at the end of the session with questions about ‘biggest barrier’, ‘most important thing Extension could do’, and ‘biggest need’.

4. Nutrient management Plans: assistance needed; involve private sector, agricultural professionals

Implications and recommendations for Extension and partners

- Consider developing simplified materials or tools that can be used by farmers themselves, with little or no on-going assistance. These simplified approaches might best be customized for size and type of operation, and are probably more suited to smaller operations. Develop and implement an outreach/education plan.
- Conduct a needs assessment for agricultural professional trainings.
- Conduct a market analysis of the opportunities for ag. professionals in providing nutrient and manure management planning services to animal operators.
- Consult and collaborate with NRCS, MDA, Conservation Districts, crop advisors, counties, etc., on the preceding recommendations, and on related issues such as certification programs for nutrient management planners

5. Website as a source of information: important to some, but most farmers are not keen to use

There is quite a range in the level of interest and proficiency when it comes to computers and the Internet. However, most of the participants are not likely to use an Extension website very often.

Implications for Extension and partners

- Consider making a decision to either focus on other media and downplay the Web’s role in serving farmers OR to promote increased use of the Web

If the latter, then:

- Consider (expanded) county level efforts for general, adult computer literacy programs
- Consider county level efforts for adult computer literacy programs that target farmers
- Use newsletters to identify and promote new publications and other resources available on-line, in a timely manner (i.e., anticipate what the producers will be thinking about at a given time)

- Utilize or publicize Extension's website during meetings and workshops

Questionnaire: key findings

Some counties are behind in the implementation of these recommended practices.

Out of a group of four counties investigated here, Pope County was found to lag behind (presuming that the county participant samples are representative).

- Extension should consider identifying other such counties, probably using informal methods
- The reasons for slower adoption of recommended practices should be identified and discussed
- Additional resources should be targeted to some of these counties to enhance progress on practice implementation

Topics/practices and resource allocation recommendations

Based on need

There are a few practices for which the participants' expected rates of implementation by 2004, will be less than 80 percent.

These are:

- Calibrate manure spreaders (74%)
- Follow Extension's recommended rates for nitrogen (71%, Non-Attendees)
- Adjust for phosphorous (62%, Non-Attendees)
- Properly manage sensitive areas (75%, Non-Attendees)
- Develop/update manure management plans (70%, Non-Attendees)

If the results for the four counties investigated are deemed a suitable basis for making statewide decisions, then:

- Relatively more resources should be applied to efforts addressing the above five issues
- Some strategies should be developed to target the 'Non-Attendees'

Based on interest (likelihood of attending an educational event)

For Extension programs or educational events, three of ten listed topics stood out in terms of likelihood of attendance.

The farmers' top choices were:

- Field selection: soil P levels and manure application rates
- Managing sensitive areas
- Applying and incorporating manure

Overall (need and interest)

Two topics rise to the top here as they are identified both with respect to need (i.e., recommended practices are being implemented at relatively low rates) and interest (farmers' own assessment of whether they would attend an event). These two topics then, could serve as the chief recommendations for resource allocations, especially meetings, workshops, or other events:

- Adjusting for phosphorous; field selection: soil P levels and manure application rates
- Managing sensitive areas

The third chief topic recommendation, arises both out of questionnaire results and the amount of interest expressed during the focus groups:

- Applying and incorporating manure

This last is especially appropriate for a field day. The producers are especially interested in seeing equipment and implements. Such would be the biggest draw for any field day. [Note however, that most

of the participants probably would not attend a field day in their own county. Just because they can provide recommendations for the topics at a field day does not mean they would attend.]

Other recommendations

The following are recommendations and ideas and suggestions that are worth investigation or follow up. Some of them originated from a single person or surfaced in only one or two focus group sessions. Some were mentioned in, or are derived from comments that occurred in a number of sessions, but were given relatively little emphasis or attention, and thus, are not included in the key findings.

Manure application record keeping and nutrient management planning (NMP)

- Financial justification More emphasis should be placed on the economic value of record keeping and planning. This is particularly important for smaller operators. They need to be able to study some case examples. They need to see some figures or estimates on how much the average producer with a particular type of operation will benefit—financially—by investing more resources in record keeping and planning. This is a key motivating factor, yet it was given little emphasis in the workshops and current materials give it little treatment. It is a logical next step for Extension. It is probably one of the key opportunities at this time.
- Liability concerns For some farmers or in some counties, an important motivating factor for improving record keeping and implementing NMP, is to reduce their liability risks and to protect against complaints and regulatory action. Thus, there is the need to develop materials and implement appropriate outreach strategies that will help producers assess the significance or likelihood of such risks, appropriately characterize the nature of such threats, and otherwise help them to make suitable decisions.

Some of the farmers made it plain that they are not going to do more record keeping or planning than they have to, and that right now they aren't really being held accountable. They won't do it unless they have to or if the benefit is proven.

Sensitive areas

- There is additional need for information and education on sensitive areas—both identification and management, but the magnitude and nature of the need varies by location (county, region of the state)
- Examples:
- locating/identifying sinkholes (some farmers have them, but don't know it—and/or don't want to find out!)
 - distinguishing between grass waterways and intermittent streams (what was once an intermittent stream, may now be a grass waterway—how should it be treated with respect to the rules?).
 - in general, identifying sensitive areas in the less obvious cases (wet meadows, low lying portions of fields, in-field waterways, minor ditches, etc.)
 - interpreting/applying the phrase 'waters of the state' on each farm, in each field

Some farmers noted that they wanted research or monitoring to find out if the rules work—for example, 'Are the setback distances are adequate or excessive?'

A few of the participants expressed an interest in site visits to help them with sensitive areas. Such one-on-one assistance is an appropriate role for the public sector. It is not a suitable niche for the private sector.

Manure spreading agreements

- Extension should develop a template agreement or a listing of the key components to consider in an agreement between sending and receiving farms for manure (e.g., between an animal producer and a grain farmer). The primary concern is with having satisfied customers and maintaining good relations with neighbors. This would help reduce problems and keep better relations in the community. Sometimes, the issue comes up rather quickly and there isn't enough time to think through the matter. It ends up being a verbal agreement.

Small group, nutrient management planning sessions for farmers (Winter 2002-3)

- In promoting or advertising the sessions, it is best to provide some details on the course content and the audience being targeted.

Farmers are less likely to go to a workshop, if they aren't sure that it will meet their needs. For example, is it a beginner course or an advanced course? Is it for people with small operations or large, or both? Is it for people with daily scrape and haul operations or for those with storage? The important thing is to make sure that the promotional materials provide this information. If it's not provided, some farmers will be skeptical about going—they'll wonder if it will be worth their time. The different subaudiences should be trained in separate sessions or in separate groups with separate trainers in the same session; that way, more of the material covered and the discussion will be relevant to each producer attending.

Educating, targeting nonfarmers

In three sessions (two counties, especially Pope) some of the participants expressed the opinion that Extension should put more emphasis on educating or targeting groups other than farmers and consultants/ag. professionals. In general, this other audience was identified as 'the public', but sometimes 'lake people'/lakeshore owners, local public officials or decision makers, state legislators, city people, and rural, nonfarmers.

The needs identified:

- education on land management, protecting water quality (lake shore owners)
 - education on the rules that farmers have to follow (general public)
 - publicity on what producers are doing/that they are doing it right—attending educational meetings, implementing stewardship practices (general public)
 - liaisonship between farmers and nonfarmers; building better community relationships between animal producers and their nonfarming neighbors and the 'townspeople'
 - Experiment station results/research finding (legislators—this gets back to the opinion that the new rules lack adequately scientific basis, the legislators don't know farming and they don't know the science, etc.)
- Extension should consider this request or suggestion, determine if or to what extent it should be addressed, and plan and implement accordingly.