

Death, taxes, and nutrient planning

Nutrient planning is a must, but whether it is done independently or with the help of a professional is an important business decision to make.

| by Scott Fleming

Ben Franklin knew all about the certainties of life — the first two being death and taxes. Tax season has come and gone, and some find themselves happy to have the deadline passed, while others are filing for an extension or were sweating heavily on April 15 wishing they had made the decision to hire out the filing rather than attempting it themselves.

While a tax discussion this is not, some growers might find the nutrient management plan writing decision to be equally as certain and as cringe-worthy. Similar to taxation, heavy variability across regulations, states, and statutes within nutrient management planning can overwhelm and even frighten.

After a quick survey of nutrient management plan rules throughout the United States, it's suffice to say most states require a nutrient management plan (NMP) or manure management plan (MMP) if manure is being applied. While some states require a plan after a certain threshold is met, other states require a plan if any manure is spread.

Differences in size

Operation size is often synonymous with the complexity of a plan. For instance, a 6,000-cow dairy is going to require a detailed planning process that covers nearly 10,000 acres. The creation of such a plan is generally best suited for a professional. That line of

thinking may lead some to believe an NMP for 100 milking goats is simple, but that's not always the case. Sometimes learning the process and taking the time to write the plan is just not worth the hassle.

Oftentimes, the intermediate-sized plan is best written internally. These farms may have the time to dedicate to the process and can easily gather an immense amount of data to help streamline their processes.

Software tools to use

Just as animal types and numbers vary, so does a grower's capacity and capability to take on advanced record-keeping and data tracking. Most nutrient management work is completed electronically. In my home state of Wisconsin, the state's department of agriculture provides free access to its own nutrient management software. In 45 other states, the Manure Management Planner software by Purdue University and the National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is accepted for the

creation of a nutrient management plan. Learn more about these tools on page 22.

Each of these programs is very simple to use by a qualified nutrient management planner, but they're not for everyone. This is especially true when it comes to the program setup. Knowing how to calculate and check slopes, determine the appropriate distance to water, and enter and verify all the other fine details of adding fields to the software can be cumbersome and time-consuming.

The ability to operate the nutrient management software does not guarantee that the nutrient management plan will be accepted. After all, we are dealing with the government. Taking a quick cyber survey, most states have some sort of farmer-written nutrient management plan provision. Generally, these require farmers to attend one or more training sessions on how to properly use the software. These plans will generally satisfy state or county-level requirements.

Consider what you know

With larger farms, the rules tend to be stricter and also more variable from state to state. It is more likely that a certified planner is required to take the reins to meet local and state laws.

It will also be no surprise that when

writing a plan for the federal government, an entirely separate certification is required. These plans can only be written by a Technical Service Provider (TSP). And the chances that a grower would want to submit themselves to the requirements of becoming a TSP to complete their own nutrient management plan is a bit of a long shot.

Along with being a certified planner, knowledge of the constantly changing regulations associated with nutrient management plans is necessary. Some adjustments are technical, such as changes to buffer widths near wells or depth to bedrock separation distance requirements. Some of these changes are purely logistical changes — requiring the submission of an additional report or changes to the NMP checklist.

Most certified planners are in tune with these regulation updates through their association with professional groups and networking, agency email updates, and regular training. These updates are usually open to growers as well, but knowing where and when to get the information is often harder than obtaining the information.

Who you know also helps

What goes hand in hand with being an industry professional are professional relationships. Networking opportunities abound in the professional space. Working in an office setting allows for interface between planners on a daily basis. These professional connections extend far beyond the walls of the office.

Relationships often exist throughout the state or even nationwide. Most professional planners are also involved in peer groups, trade advocacy groups, and professional organizations. The greatest value in these relationships is having someone to hear ideas or provide helpful advice based on past experience.

Connections also exist between planners and plan regulators. These government regulators exist from the local to the federal level. Having a strong working relationship creates mutual understanding between a planner and the regulator.

A great example from my personal bank is plan deliverables. What deliverables are submitted to each county to satisfy their requirements varies greatly from county to county. The manner in which these deliverables are submitted varies just as much as what is required to be submitted. Without strong working relationships, it would be difficult for an individual writing their own plan to know what to send or where to send it.

Find the right fit

This may all sound like a complicated sales tactic to drive growers straight to a professional plan writer. However, I will be the first to share that a farm-written plan can be a fantastic tool for a grower to fine-tune their operation. This calibration is far more than knowing where and how much manure to apply.

Completing their own NMP can help farmers know when

and where they may be shorting or oversupplying nutrients. Doing your plan can help you identify manure restrictions or prohibitions. And most of all, writing your own plan can give you ownership of the planning process.

When writing your own plan, you can dial in your commercial and manure applications with pinpoint precision rather than just running a blanket approach on all acres. You will also know exactly where and when some of the planning guidelines were or were not followed.

Much like your taxes, when the severity of regulations outweighs the benefits of internal completion, it's time to consider a professional to help you complete the process. I will always encourage growers to write their own nutrient management plan, but when the task becomes too much, knowing that there is a professional there to back you up can help you sleep better at night. ■



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