

Nutrient Management Plans Lower Fertilizer Cost And Prevent Water Pollution



Marty Heatherington writes and approves nutrient management plans as part of her responsibilities as Chesapeake Bay Technician for the Schuylkill Conservation District. Currently Heatherington works with 40 farmers who have Chesapeake Bay contracts and are required to have nutrient management plans implemented on their farms.

JAYNE SEBRIGHT
Lancaster Farming Staff

POTTSVILLE (Schuylkill Co.) — Writing nutrient management plans allows Marty Heatherington to help farmers keep clean water clean. As the Chesapeake Bay Coordinator for the Schuylkill Conservation District, it's Heatherington's job to help farmers develop best management practices on their farms.

"I provide nutrient management information and help them with the technical and administration work," said Heatherington. "We work with the farmers to determine what Best Management Practices (BMPs) he wants to install on his farm."

Nutrient Management Plans A Must

In order to receive funding through the Chesapeake Bay program, farmers are required to have nutrient management plan. Heatherington is certified to write and approve these plans. However, the larger operations, defined as CAFOs, must hire private consultants to write their plans.

"I will write plans for any farmer who is in the Bay program," said Heatherington. "And I encourage other farmers to work with private consultants."

According to Heatherington, most farmers start out being apprehensive about working with the government. But when they see the benefits that their neighbor is getting out the program, they're more willing to get involved with the

Chesapeake Bay program.

"The word of mouth is probably my best seller for new clients," said Heatherington. "Once they see their neighbor putting up a new manure storage facility, they'll call me about the program."

Manure Storage Hot Ticket Item

When Heatherington first meets with the farmer to develop a nutrient management plan and enroll them in the Chesapeake Bay program, she works with them to determine what will work best on their operation.

"Manure storage systems are the big ticket item that we install," said Heatherington. "But we also install diversions around barns, roof gutters, and other nutrient management tools."

As part of the Chesapeake Bay program, Heatherington helps the farmers develop Ag Waste Storage Plans on their farm. Part of that plan includes conservation plans for croplands and a nutrient management plan for the animal operation.

Nutrient Management Benefits The Farmer

"My best salespeople are the other farmers," said Heatherington. "For farmers it is all about the economics."

When Heatherington develops a plan for a farmer, she shows him how much money he can save by using less fertilizer and managing his on-farm nutrients better. For most farmers, manure is considered a waste product. But most plans that Heatherington writes include savings in the side dressing.

"When I add up my calculations, I go back to the farmer and show him that he doesn't need as much side dressing," said Heatherington.

Usually the farmers don't believe Heatherington. So she challenges them to use two different fields and put normal amounts of fertilizer on one field and cut back on the other field.

"When we do a yield check, there is no difference in the yields," said Heatherington. "I don't expect them to take my word for it. I get them to see it for themselves."

NMP Needs More Funding

Heatherington is fortunate in her county to have so many farmers interested in developing nutrient management plans. Unfortunately, only half of the farmers are located in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. The other farmers do not have funding available to develop their plans.

"And money is getting tighter in the Chesapeake Bay program," said Heatherington. "We're competing with more and more counties, and the program seems to be losing money."

Currently Heatherington has 40 farms contracted with the Chesapeake Bay program. However, she would like to offer the farmers outside the Bay watershed the same opportunities.

"We're hoping to get funding through the Growing Greener fund," said Heatherington. "Schuylkill has submitted the highest number of proposals for Growing Greener projects in Pennsylvania. However, none of the ag projects received any monies."