

How Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans Are Making a Difference: The Farmer's Perspective

by Dave Bojanowski

Two farmers were casually waiting in line at the tractor supply store. They looked somewhat alike: both were in weathered brown duck work clothes, tattered baseball hats, flannel shirts, and had hands as big as baseball mitts. Their pasts were also similar, third generation dairy farmers. Yet when they struck up a conversation their traditional, similar past evaporated into the challenges of a changing future.

"You fixin' a breakdown or getting ready for spring planting," offered the older man.

"Neither. My CAFO planner tells me I gotta start injecting my manure to keep the odors down and reduce runoff. Gonna need to buy a bigger tractor with more horsepower to pull it," grunted the younger man. The wind and snow were howling outside, and neither seemed in any hurry to button up their overalls and face the brutal cold.

"Yeah, we went the injection route a few years back," the elder consoled. "Haven't finished paying for it yet, but the neighbors sure do appreciate it, and it saved us quite a bit on fertilizer purchases. You have many other practices your CAFO planner wants you to install?" he quietly inquired.

"Oh, do I ever! Gutters on the old barn, new roof over the dry cow barnyard, diversion ditch above the milk parlor, expand the manure storage. Oh yeah, and no more winter spreading along the river valley. Heck, that's the only place dry enough I can get on in the winter without sinking up to the axles. You got many?" he cautiously quizzed.

"Not really too bad—a few small things we were planning to do anyhow. When the old main barn burnt 10 years ago, we built a new freestall barn and moved all the cows to a new site up on the hill. Heck, because of the better air flow the cows picked up milk production right from the git-go," he

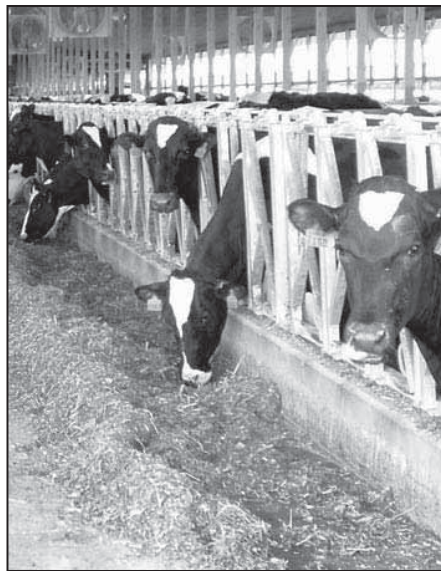


Photo Credit: Soil and Water Conservation District

offered. "Been making more milk per cow ever since."

"Man, I wish I could move my facility," the younger man, sounding frustrated and tired, sighed. "I'm surrounded by the creek on one side and a protected wetland on the other. No place to move without my CAFO planner havin' a major fit over how it might affect water quality. When my grandfather built on our spot 85 years ago, he thought all the water was a big plus for a dairy farm. Now it's drowning me. Everything I do costs twice as much 'cause of my location. My banker likes to call me his retirement account, and he's only just turned 40! I don't think this CAFO stuff is worth a hill of beans," he mused with a stare.

The elder man recognized his fortune with his new barn location and felt a responsibility to offer a positive window for the younger man: "Yeah, it's difficult for us to accept some of the regulations they want us to comply with, but it seems once we get there, it wasn't as difficult as we thought. Be

patient." The elder's thoughtful effort fell like a tab of butter on a red hot skillet.

"Patient! Ahhhhh—about what? I'm behind on feed payments! I need a new mixer wagon, and we can't keep hired help on for more than two weeks. My patience wore out long ago. Day to day management is the gear I'm stuck in. I don't spend time or money on anything that I can't sell and get my investment back. It's that simple."

As the conversation stalled, neither felt comfortable with how to bridge their different views of the future. A common journey had brought them to this stage of food production together. Now, outside forces of change are applying pressure on both farmsteads to comply with new environmental standards, and each has made the bold first step with a plan toward understanding the issues. For some, the future looks like an insurmountable challenge. For others, it's just the future.

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