

What Consultants Should Know about NRCS's Enhanced Nutrient Management Program

Developed by NRCS in partnership with Sustainable Chesapeake to support Sustainable Chesapeake's Regional Conservation Partnership Project #1815 titled *Chesapeake Farm Stewardship and Preservation*. NRCS is accepting applications for enhanced nutrient management, soil health, and drainage management through November 20, 2020. EQIP-eligible producers interested in implementing these practices on farmland in Dorchester, Wicomico, Somerset, and Worcester counties are encouraged to consider applying.

What does enhanced NM mean to NRCS and what types of conservation activities are eligible for funding? Enhanced nutrient management to NRCS is going above and beyond the basic nutrient management plan and state nutrient recommendations. This can be achieved by doing any of the following which are cost share scenarios to choose from:

- Basic NM w/manure injection and/or incorporation
- Small Farm NM
- Basic NM w/ manure and/or compost
- Basic Precision NM
- Adaptive NM

Please see the Attachment 1 for NRCS criteria for more detail.

With each of these scenarios, there is typically in-season testing required that is above and beyond what a producer has done in the past. The data derived from the testing or application methods needs to be utilized to inform management decisions. For example, if a producer decides to do a PSNT prior to sidedressing nitrogen, and his results come back that nitrogen levels are sufficient, then continuing to sidedress just because the original nutrient management plan recommended it would not be fulfilling the cost share scenario.

Likewise, with zone/grid sampling, if the pH, potassium or phosphorus comes back that zones of lesser fertility may be required, NRCS would expect that those areas will receive less fertilizer with the equipment available to the producer. However, if the prescription calls for more fertilizer to reach yield potential, the producer is not obligated to apply more if they do not wish to do so.

In summary, a key goal of precision NM is trying to lessen the overuse of nutrients through increased testing and improved nutrient application methods that reduce the likelihood of leaching/volatilization. It is not enough to have the information from these tests, but to also utilize them to make management decisions on true nutrient needs in-season.

What does a producer need to do to confirm eligibility for the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)? Basic EQIP eligibility refers to producers being set up with Farm Service Agency (FSA) as an individual, entity, or joint venture and associated with the farm tracts for which funding is requested. While visiting FSA, producers will need to fill out a self-certification for adjusted gross income (it must be less than \$900,000/year to be eligible). Producers must also review wetland and highly erodible land (HEL) compliance requirements. Producers interested in NRCS funding should make it a priority to visit FSA to ensure EQIP eligibility is established. Note there is also a limitation on

overall cost share amounts awarded to any one individual during a farm bill. NRCS checks this prior to going forward with the cost share application.

What does continuous improvement mean to NRCS in terms of what practices are eligible for funding through EQIP? At NRCS we are constantly striving for producers to push towards higher levels of stewardship. For example, if a tract of land has is managed in no-till (one of the best ways to limit soil disturbance for cropland), the tract would not be eligible for reduced tillage, because increasing tillage above the no-till conservation practice would be taking a step back.

How can consultants help their clients and NRCS field staff develop successful conservation projects will lead to expanded adoption? and that NRCS will be able to administer without too much drama.

No matter what cost share scenario is selected, the biggest take home for consultants is that they really need to make a game plan that works for their client and that their client will want to implement.

A key consideration for NRCS cost share for enhanced nutrient management is that producers must be willing to keep and share records with NRCS to document the contract implementation. NRCS cannot distribute taxpayer funding for practices unless they can verify implementation. And unlike a structure or in-ground practice that NRCS can visit to verify the practice was installed as planned, detailed records to justify the plan and document implementation are the only way NRCS staff can verify that the enhanced nutrient management practice has been implemented. *Lack of sufficient record keeping and/or record sharing with NRCS is one of the biggest administrative hurdles to delivering enhanced nutrient management cost share funding to producers with signed contracts. Coordination with consultants who are keeping records for their clients can lead to successful delivery of cost share funding to producers.*

Record keeping recommendations include:

- Consultants should have a clear understanding of their role in helping their clients keep records and can potentially serve as the farmer's representative for documenting implementation and certifying payments.
- Records should document implementation of the farm's basic nutrient management plan as well as enhancements.
- Records can be provided to NRCS via a table format or with maps.
- For producers that are awarded contracts, developing a master list of the NRCS Farm/Tract number used on the contract and corresponding NMP farms/field numbers can avoid confusion. Often, these numbers are different.

When it comes to the actual enhancement scenarios contracted, consultants can help producers ensure that any custom applicators or farm field hands are brought into the conversation so there everyone involved with nutrient management and fertility can understand the contract commitments and reporting requirements. Consultants can also help producers to stay on track with the enhancement implementation schedule.

Why would a consultant want to help their client apply for these funds? What is in it for the private sector?

Some of the enhancements eligible for funding through the Enhanced 590 Conservation Practice have a considerable price tag for implementation that may be a barrier for producers. Cost share assumes some of the financial risk associated with trying and innovative ways to increase nutrient use efficiency. Ultimately, the goal is that producers will figure out what enhanced nutrient management practices are cost-effective to implement in the long-term beyond the life of the NRCS contract. NRCS cost share can also offset some of the costs of hiring a consultant, especially if they are active in the sampling and testing process.

Other administrative considerations?

Consultants should keep in mind that field offices have a limited capacity to process applications from new clients (producers who do not already have a relationship with NRCS). The conservation planning process that underlies NRCS financial incentive programs requires site visits and the development of conservation plans for each tract prior to contracting. NRCS needs time to develop plans for producers who have never participated in NRCS programs.

Once conservation plans for a farm tract are developed, it takes much less time to update them as needed. As such, producers who already have a relationship with NRCS are in a good position to apply for financial incentives through RCPP for the November 20, 2020 deadline. Producers new to NRCS may not be able to complete the conservation planning process in time for program funding this fall. However, getting them in the door to start the conservation planning process with NRCS will position them to apply for financial incentives in the future.

Who should I contact for more information?

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