CNMP Certification for Third Party Technical Service Providers

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Abstract. A joint University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service (UTAES) and Tennessee USDA-NRCS CNMP Technical Service Provider certification program has been developed and implemented over the past four years. A primary component of the certification program is the successful completion of a CNMP Development course. The course is lead by the University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service and teaches CNMP development process that is applicable in any region of the United States. This process is demonstrated using examples from a CNMP developed for a working dairy farm. Under a national MOU signed April 9, 2003 between the USDA and The University of Tennessee, the Tennessee CNMP Certification is recognized by NRCS nationally. A curriculum committee with members from land grant extension personnel from three states, NRCS personnel from both state and national offices and industry representatives oversees course content. This paper shares information and lessons learned during the development and implementation of the Tennessee CNMP Technical Service Provider certification program.

Keywords. CNMP, nutrient management planning, extension, TSP

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Introduction

Using a cooperative approach with the Tennessee USDA-NRCS, The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service (UTAES) has developed a successful Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan certification program that is consistent with NRCS’s Conservation Planning Policy and certification criteria. Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans for animal feeding operations are required to be prepared by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, or a certified third party Technical Service Provider (TSP), (USDA-NRCS, 2002a). Technical Service Providers are individuals certified to provide technical assistance on behalf of USDA, and are expected to play a vital role in developing elements of a CNMP. Technical assistance includes conservation planning and design, layout, installation, and review of approved conservation practices. NRCS and conservation districts have traditionally provided these technical services, and will continue to do so. However, now USDA will reimburse producers for technical assistance provided by certified Technical Service Providers. To meet the expected need, it is important that an adequate number of TSPs are trained and certified by a NRCS certifying organization to develop elements of a CNMP. Under a national MOU signed April 9, 2003 between the USDA and The University of Tennessee, the University of Tennessee has been recognized by NRCS as a recommended certifying organization.

The focal point of the CNMP certification program is the successful completion of the CNMP Development course offered by The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service. This three-day short course is designed to train and provide information to consultants and prospective TSPs in the development of the elements of a Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP). Course participants learn how to prepare a CNMP to meet current NRCS guidelines. The course is focused on the CNMP development process. A CNMP developed for an existing livestock facility is used to demonstrate practical plan preparation techniques. Course participants receive training that is applicable in any state, as well as experience with a real plan during the course. Attendees receive an example CNMP, and are introduced to available preparation assistance software during the course. The course also includes a section that covers state specific information for the development of CNMPs in the state of Tennessee.

The course prepares individuals for certification in the manure and wastewater storage and handling, nutrient management and land treatment elements of a CNMP (USDA-NRCS, 2002b). Upon completion, the attendee must pass an exam within each element for which he or she would like to be certified. The course was developed by the UT Agricultural Extension Service in cooperation with Tennessee NRCS and industry consultants. A team of instructors selected from across the country teaches the course. They not only have academic credentials in their topic areas, but considerable practical experience as well.

Methods

Partnerships

A cooperative approach with NRCS was used from the beginning in the development and implementation of the certification program. Half of the course instructors are CSREES Land Grant Extension faculty and the remainder are USDA-NRCS employees. This CNMP certification program has been successful due to the strong NRCS / CSREES / UT partnership. Because the CNMP process has been defined and developed by NRCS, the inclusion of USDA-NRCS personnel was critical to be able to provide practical training on CNMPs and their overall fit within the Conservation Planning Process (USDA-NRCS, 2001).
In addition to cooperating with USDA-NRCS, the certification program has also cooperated with CSREES Land Grant Extension and other university personnel. Over the past three years instructors from Michigan State University, Auburn University, Purdue University, The University of South Carolina and North Carolina State University have served as course instructors.

**CNMP Certification Development Course**

To date the certification program has offered three CNMP development courses in February 2001, 2002 and 2003. The course teaches CNMP development process that is applicable in any region of the United States. This process is demonstrated using examples from a CNMP developed for a working dairy farm. The CNMP Development course is currently recognized as meeting the educational requirement toward national CNMP certification as a TSP under a Memorandum of Agreement (MOU) with USDA. A curriculum committee with members from land grant extension personnel from three states, NRCS personnel from both state and national offices and industry representatives oversees course content.

Planning for the CNMP Development course starts nine months in advance by setting the meeting date and identifying the location where the course will be held. The identified location is contacted and contracts are developed and signed. An on-site visit to the conference location is helpful in securing the facilities required for the course. During the next few months, the previous course is evaluated and amended. Instructors are contacted and invited to speak at the course. Recently, a pre-course instructor meeting was implemented. The goal of this meeting was to make the presentations and in-class examples more cohesive. This meeting included a visit to the farm where the example CNMP for the course was developed.

Four months prior to the course, a web site is updated to advertise the course and a flyer for the course is developed and printed. Also, mailing list are updated and generated. Potential attendee names and addresses are obtained from ASAE, certified crop advisors (CCA), state professional engineering registration and personal mailing lists. For the course, ~25,000 flyers are mailed throughout the United States and internationally. Flyers are mailed two and one half months prior to the course. One and one half months prior to the course, potential attendees are emailed to remind and to inform them about the upcoming course.

One and one half months prior to the course, instructors are required to submit electronic copies of their presentations, additional materials they would like in their section of the notebook, and five exam questions about their topic area. The presentations are printed in black and white with three slides to a page and inserted in the course notebook that is distributed to the attendees. In the month leading up to the course, the notebooks are published for distribution at the conference, and a CD containing additional course materials and software programs is developed and reproduced.

Attendee registration is handled through the Professional Development Center at the University of Tennessee. Three levels of registration are available: instructor registration, standard registration and vendor registration. Instructor registration allows attendees to register at no cost to them, but still provides them with the two continuing education units (20 hours) from the University of Tennessee. Standard registration is available for individual attendees registering for the course. Vendor registration provides the attendee with the standard registration plus a table in the exhibition and break area. An exhibition area was implemented to provide attendees contact time with industry representatives and equipment suppliers. Course breaks and receptions are served in the exhibition area to encourage vendor and attendee interaction.
Course Instructors

Instructors are selected from across the country to teach the course materials. These individuals not only have academic credentials in their topic areas, but considerable practical experience as well. Instructors represent the NRCS on the state and national level, the EPA, the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service and other universities. Over the past three years the number of course instructors has ranged from a low of 12 to a high of 21. We strive to utilize instructors who are truly recognized experts in the subject matter to be taught. We believe this approach helps make the course excellent. The downside of using a large number of instructors is that it increases course cost substantially.

Course Materials

All course attendees receive a notebook and a CD. The notebook is divided into sections by topic. Under each topic area, a copy of the instructor’s presentation printed three slides per page with lined space to take notes and resource materials are provided. The course CD contains resource materials that are too lengthy to be included in the course notebook as well as software or other useful information available in an electronic format.

Each course attendee also receives an example CNMP. The example CNMP is a real plan developed for a working dairy farm. The course instructors worked cooperatively to produce the example CNMP. While the course is not state specific, the example CNMP reflects state specific conditions since it is a real CNMP developed on a Tennessee dairy.

Course Feedback

Upon arrival at the course each attendee is given a detailed course survey. Course participants are asked to provide feedback on each speaker and topic individually as well as the course as a whole. Specific questions are asked concerning the handout materials and course content as well as the meeting facilities. Throughout the course, we remind and encourage attendees to fill out the survey and to let us know what they would like to see changed or retained in the course. At the end of the course, we collect the surveys and provide a summary of the results to each course instructor. Over the past three years these survey results have indicated that over 99 percent of the course participants would recommend the program to a colleague and over 94 percent gave the program an overall rating of excellent or very good.

Program Costs

Currently, the only cost to the TSP for certification is the CNMP training course fee. The current course fee is $750 per person. An exhibitor fee of $950 entitles one person to attend the course, plus have a space in the vendor exhibitor area. All course breaks are served in the exhibition area. The course fee includes a course notebook of resource materials supporting each topic area covered. The fee also covers break refreshments and lunch for all three-course days. During 2001 and 2002 the course was offered at a costs of $400 and $550 respectively. These lower course registration costs were possible due to grant support for the course from the Tennessee Department of Agriculture. The course fee is set each year based on a projected break-even cost. A spreadsheet has been developed to add all of the fixed and variable course costs. Using the spreadsheet, the break-even cost for the course can be estimated for variable course attendance projections. Our goal is to keep the course fee as low as possible. The annual course budget has averaged $60,000 over the past three years. Typically the course has generated from $5,000 to $10,000 dollars above cost each year. This money is used as seed money for the course in the following year. This is very important because course advertising
and material costs will occur before dollars from course fees are generated. The course fees
only cover costs associated with the course. No course fees cover University of Tennessee
faculty and staff time associated with the program.

A certificate indicating completion of 2.0 Continuing Education Units (1 CEU = 10 hours) is
provided to each participant, and The University of Tennessee Professional & Personal
Development Office maintains a formal record of these CEUs for 10 years from the date of
completion. Each course attendee is responsible for making their own lodging arrangements at
the facility of their choice. A block of rooms is reserved at the hotel where the course is held, but
information on other nearby hotels is also provided.

Program Website

A website for animal waste management issues is maintained at the University of Tennessee in
the Biosystems Engineering and Environmental Science Department (http://wastemgmt.ag.utk.edu/). Pages providing CNMP Certification information, CNMP
Development course information and a list of certified Technical Service Providers are located
within that website. The website provides a means for providing up-to-date information about
the certification program. The CNMP certification page lists the certification requirements for
Tennessee and provides links to required viewing and testing sites maintained by USDA-NRCS.
Additionally, it contains sample CNMPs and links to helpful software and publications. The
CNMP Development course page is an electronic replica of the flyer published for course
advertising and registration. Course registration is available on-line via the website. The
Technical Service Provider page lists individuals certified in Tennessee and gives their contact
information.

Conclusion

Over the past three years three CNMP certification courses have been offered during February
2001, 2002 and 2003. A total of 264 people have been trained and have represented 27 states
and 6 countries. In surveys completed by course attendees, over 99 percent indicated that they
would recommend the program to a colleague and over 94 percent gave the program an overall
rating of excellent or very good. Currently 51 people are pursuing certification as CNMP TSPs.
The breakout by element area is as follows; 35 are working towards their certification as
element writers in the area of Manure Wastewater Handling & Storage, 41 in the Nutrient
Management element area and 43 in the Land Treatment Practices element area (some
consultants are seeking certification in all three areas). Under a national MOU signed April 9,
2003 between the USDA and The University of Tennessee, the Tennessee CNMP Certification
course is recognized by NRCS nationally toward registration as a TSP (USDA-NRCS, 2003a).

By using a cooperative approach between extension and USDA-NRCS, a successful CNMP
certification program and training course has been established. Program coordinators have
modified the certification course each year based on the results of the course surveys. These
changes have resulted in each year’s course becoming better than the previous year. This
approach has resulted in program excellence recognized by USDA-NRCS in form of national
MOU as a TSP certification program in the CNMP area. Individuals who complete the
certification requirements through this certification program are eligible to go online through
USDA-NRCS’s Technical Service Provider registry and register to become USDA Technical
Service Providers. USDA customers will be able to easily locate and contact available TSPs
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