

THE MANAGER

TOP MANAGERS

By Brad Schwab

Identify and implement achievable practices, create positive first impressions, identify and capitalize on cost advantages, follow advice of consultants and accept regulation



How Top Dairies Handle Environmental Regulation

The intensity of environmental regulation varies from state to state, but regardless of where you farm, regulation continues to grow more rigorous, complex and confusing. It is safe to assume that this trend will not change anytime soon, so finding ways to effectively manage regulation will be increasingly important to the future and growth of your business.

Through my work with more than 50 of New York State's largest farms, I have seen first-hand the successes and failures of farm managers who try to navigate this process. Five general approaches I have found common among successful managers are:

1. Pick the low hanging fruit first

If you do not have a Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) now, chances are you will have one soon. The CNMP outlines how the farmstead and cropping systems should be managed, and identifies changes that need to be made. Some changes in the plan are inexpensive and easy to make, while others are more expensive and challenging. Work with the consultant who wrote your plan to identify the easy ones, make sure you understand them, and schedule them to be worked on right away. Implementing the easier practices without delay is a sign to regulators and others that you take compliance seriously.

2. First impressions are important

Right or wrong, compliance inspections can be impacted by conditions that are not related to regulatory compliance. A farm with a tidy appearance usually fares better with regulators. A regulator's report is more favorable when records are written on a clear space at a table than ones that are written on the tailgate of a pickup. A regulator responds better to a handshake and a smile than to crossed arms and a grumble. When an inspector visits your farm, always keep in mind the possibility that they could visit your farm once a year until they retire. It is important to avoid starting out on the wrong foot.

3. Find benefits that justify the costs and take advantage of them

Compliance with environmental regulations will cost money. This is a tough pill to swallow, but some of the money can be made back in the process. If

soil samples are required, be sure to use them when buying lime and fertilizers, or when deciding where to spread manure. If the CNMP requires structural changes, request state and/or federal funding for these capital improvements. In conjunction with a good record-keeping system, the CNMP can be valuable if you ever need to defend or explain something you have done. Some operators ignore the opportunities and dismiss the process as a cost of doing business. Those who are successful managers take advantage of these opportunities.

4. Take advice from your consultants

Your environmental consultant is constantly exposed to a range of different situations and can give valuable insight about what you should expect from regulators based on his or her experience with other farms. Through your consultant you can benefit from ideas others have tried and found successful. You can also avoid making the same mistakes your neighbor has already made. This insight cannot be found elsewhere, and chances are you are already paying for it.

5. Avoiding or ignoring regulation is a dead end road

Winston Churchill once said "We must take change by the hand or, rest assuredly, change will take us by the throat." The same can be said about regulation. No amount of ignoring it or pretending it does not exist will make it go away. Environmental regulation is a part of our future, and the sooner you recognize it as an important part of your business, the better off you will be. Ironically, managers who accept regulations seem to spend far less time worrying about them, than those managers who have decided to avoid or ignore them.

I recognize that some of these things are easier said than done, but my experience tells me that following these general rules will make the regulation process as painless as possible. □

FYI

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