

Better than average: Helpful tips for using the nutrient mass balance from a long-term user

An interview with Meghan Hauser, Table Rock Farm, New York

Dairy farm nutrient mass balances (NMBs) are gaining traction in some parts of the U.S. and the European Union is considering widespread use on farms. This three-part series offers an in depth overview, including on-farm experience. Table Rock Farm, in western New York, has calculated their NMB every year since 2006. Meghan Hauser, one of the farm owners and general manager, offers suggestions based on her experience.

HAS NMB HELPED KEEP CROP EXPENSES IN LINE?

We don't use NMB to measure expenses or to keep them in line, but it is a way for us to see if we are being effective with our nutrients, our farming practices and our management decisions.

For example, when we went to wide-swath hay harvest and more digestible corn, we made small changes to how forages were fed and saw a significant change in our nutrient balance.

Likewise, when we were required to stop using rBST, we could see that our nutrient balance was negatively affected.

As for fertilizer rate changes, we base these decisions more on farm trials performed by the Cornell University Nutrient Management Spear Program.

HOW HAVE YOU USED THE NMB INFORMATION?

There are many aspects of this tool that we find valuable. We like that the

study tracks our progress over time. With a simple review we can clearly see if we are becoming better at nutrient balancing or not. We can also compare ourselves to our farming peers.

Trends can only be seen if you complete the study each year, so it's important to share data each year. Multiple study years also allow you to see the effect a change in farming practices, the inclusion of a new nutrient or a change in bedding practices can have.

It is a tool we use to challenge ourselves to improve as farmers. It should be a goal for all of us to handle nutrients wisely, and the NMB is our annual report card in this area.

ANY TRICKS TO MAKE ENTRIES EASIER?

My tricks are not very tricky:

Complete the study the first year. After that you will know the information you need to complete it the following year. Then:

1 Keep good records during the year, including any details needed to complete the study (tons or yards of material used, manure exports, etc). A bookkeeping program that allows for notes or inclusion of weights/loads, etc is helpful.

2 Establish a spreadsheet that will give you the study answers you need once you input that data.



Meghan Hauser and her father, Willard DeGolyer, Table Rock Farm, New York.

Photo courtesy of DMI.

3 For areas that require a formula or that follow a guideline (converting yards to tons for example), establish that information with an expert and record it in your spreadsheet for future use.

4 Keep data from previous years handy so you can refer to it and check that this year's answers are reasonable.

5 Involve your nutritionist or other ag professional. I input tons of feed purchased, then share this with our nutritionist to make sure feed ingredient nutrient information is accurate.

6 Understand that after you get through the process once, making sure to adjust how you keep records will streamline the process for next year. For example, tracking tons of soy meal or canola meal purchased makes the total nutrient calculation much easier than if the accounting system only tracks total amount paid for a commodity. ■