CERTIFIED CROP ADVISER

Certified Crop Adviser Program

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Testimony of Steve Dlugosz, Certified Crop Adviser
Presented on behalf of the International Certified Crop Adviser (ICCA) Program and the American Society of Agronomy (ASA) to the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Energy and Research
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The International Certified Crop Adviser (ICCA) Program is a voluntary professional certification program of the American Society of Agronomy (ASA). Of the many individuals starting the certification process, only 62% are successful and become Certified Crop Advisers. Currently there are approximately 13,000 Certified Crop Advisers (CCAs) throughout the United States and Canada, with new programs beginning in India and Argentina.

A CCA provides both agronomic advice and information as well as, in many cases, agronomic inputs to growers. Being a CCA separates us from those who simply supply (sell) crop production inputs, as we provide services and make recommendations for the appropriate inputs. Over 85% of the CCAs work for an Ag Retail or Farm Cooperative type business, while others may have their own business providing only services, or work for USDA NRCS, Cooperative Extension, or state/local government agencies.

Qualifications required to become and remain a CCA

1. Exams:
   Pass two comprehensive exams covering four primary competency areas:
   a. nutrient management
   b. soil and water management
   c. integrated pest management
   d. crop management
2. Education and Experience:
   a. Bachelors of Science (BS) degree in Agronomy or a closely related field with at least two years of experience; or
   b. Associates Degree (two years) in Agriculture with minimum of fifteen credits in agronomy related course work with three years of experience; or
   c. A degree that does not relate to agronomy or no degree post high school with at least four years of experience.
3. Ethics:
   Every CCA must sign and agree to uphold the CCA Code of Ethics, pledging to do what is in the best interests of the land owner. Violation of this code could lead to de-certification.
4. Maintenance:
   To maintain their certification, a CCA must earn forty hours of continuing education every two-years. There must be at least five hours in each of the four primary competency areas: nutrient management; soil and water management; integrated pest management; and crop management.

A CCA is committed to working with their grower customers in adopting the best management practices that are both economically and environmentally sound. A CCA is considered a business partner to the grower because both have a lot to gain or lose based on the recommendations that are made. A large producer survey conducted by Purdue University's Center for Food and Agriculture Business indicated that farmers ranked honesty and technological competence as the top two characteristics of their suppliers. The ICCA Program strives to ensure that CCAs meet both requirements through the code of ethics and continuing education standards.

CCAs are recognized by USDA-NRCS as Technical Service Providers (TSP) in nutrient management, pest management and residue management or tillage practices. There are 1,220 TSPs throughout the United States; of those, 353 TSPs (29% of the total) identify as CCAs. (numbers provided by NRCS). CCAs are also recognized by the Risk Management Agency (RMA) as agricultural experts related to crop insurance claims.

For a CCA to become and maintain a TSP standing

1. A CCA registers with USDA-NRCS through their online techreg site. A CCA must provide their CCA number which is verified by ASA. The categories that the CCA plans to work under are self identified during the registration process. The MOU that ASA ICCA signed with USDA-NRCS requires that the CCA maintain their CCA status and register with NRCS every three years.
2. Depending on the state's interpretation of the TSP rules, the state NRCS office may require the CCA to complete additional training. However, this is not supposed to be the case since the 2008 Farm Bill standardized the registration process.
3. Maintenance requires registering every three years and keeping their CCA designation active.

Early on in the TSP Program, there were approximately 2,200 TSPs throughout the US, 51% of which were CCAs. As the program matured, rules were changed and states enacted state-specific requirements, in essence ignoring the MOU standards. This led to many of the CCAs dropping out of the TSP program and a precipitous decline in the number of private sector CCAs involved.

The ICCA Program and ASA have worked with USDA NRCS to evaluate the TSP system and have proposed changes for the future. Those changes were developed by a group of CCAs and NRCS staff with experience working directly with the program. The new system was 'pilot tested' in eight states. Although the volume was low, the overall recommendation was to implement the new system nationally. Unfortunately, to date, that has not been done.

Experiences from the field

Overall, in the beginning of the TSP Program, CCAs viewed it as a business opportunity to become "more partnered with the grower" and more completely serve their customer base. It was viewed as a way to get better nutrient management planning and quicker adoption of new technologies done in a way that might increase farm revenue or avoid increased production costs.

As time progressed it became more of a challenge than it was worth, yielding a high drop-out rate by private sector CCAs. There have been changes made to the system that have helped improve it. Not-to-exceed rates were discontinued and payments were supposed to take into account local market conditions, while farmers were allowed to select the TSP.

County Level Technical Assistance

The relationship between CCAs and local county office NRCS staff is critical to the success of the TSP Program. Unfortunately, there is a wide disparity between NRCS county offices as far as the ability and understanding of the local staff. Some District Conservationists (DC) were very receptive to the concept and worked closely with CCAs to implement the program. In those counties, more nutrient management plans were adopted and implemented. In one example, it went as far as the DC asking the CCA to help "sell" nutrient management planning to farmers. This resulted in more plans and all participating farmers having EQIP contracts. In a neighboring county, the DC was not in favor of having TSPs. They were very defensive and dismissive to the point of discouraging involvement by CCAs, resulting in a very low implementation rate of nutrient management plans by farmers.

There will always be a degree of difference between individuals in how they perform their job functions, but the degree that exists today is far too wide to be appropriate. It is exaggerated by the lack of agricultural background and knowledge at the county position level. The skill or knowledge level is also typically based on traditional NRCS practice work, specifically engineering related practices. There is, at times, a component of engineering that is required such as storage structures or earth moving, but nutrient management planning is not only engineering focused. The land application of manure does not require an engineer. It requires a Certified Crop Adviser, Certified Professional Agronomist or Certified Professional Soil Scientist who understands agronomic production practices. The same can be said for pest management planning.

One of the original goals of TSP was to take advantage of the private sector professional in the field that already had the relationship with the farmer and understood what production practices were in place so there would be quicker adoption of new practices to improve conservation implementation. Farmers know and trust their CCAs. They have a long standing business relationship with them. Farmers do not on average want the government telling them what to do or in many cases even know what they are doing. The CCA is more knowledgeable and understands agronomic production practices better. For example, a DC told the grower that they needed to lime their fields but the nutrient management plan developed by a CCA based on soil sampling recommendations did not call for lime. Lime was not needed based on the science but lime is considered a soil amendment and lime payments are based on "traditions". The CCA argued that based on the science lime was not needed and would be a waste of money. The DC would not release the payments to the farmer until the farmer applied lime.

Solutions: There are two parts. First, to improve the ability of local NRCS staff at the county and state levels and gain consistency between states and counties, requires that all agronomy focused staff become Certified Crop Advisers or Certified Professional Agronomists. The ICCA

Program first qualifies a person through examination and credential review. Then they grow their knowledge and skills through the continuing education requirements. NRCS already requires professional certification or licensing for engineers, land surveyors and other professional staff. Why not include agronomy and soils focused staff? It would help improve the overall performance and delivery of conservation practices. The second part to the solution would be to allow county based personnel to cross county lines so if there is a highly interested and talented individual in nutrient management planning for example, allow them to work in multiple counties and focus on their strengths.

Finding qualified agronomy professionals is a challenge for everyone in agriculture today. There is a growing demand for the professionals but fewer students are taking up the study. ASA is currently working with other scientific associations and industry organizations to try to attract more individuals to the profession.

Inconsistency on paperwork requirements

There appears to be a gap between what paperwork is required between states and between counties within states as reported by TSPs who are CCAs.

Solution: Standardize the paperwork across county and state lines. Bring together a group of CCAs who have experience of being a TSP and have them work with local NRCS employees who also have experience working with TSPs to design a standard set of documents and forms.

Summary:

The relationship between the CCA TSP and the local county level NRCS staff is very critical to the successful delivery of conservation practices on the ground. A positive and mutually supportive relationship yields a higher adoption rate of practices on the farm which ultimately should lead to improved environmental conditions in that local area. NRCS should capitalize on the existing MOU they have with ASA to fully implement the TSP program and fully engage the CCAs working in the private sector. CCAs have a long standing and trusted business relationship with the farmer. CCAs know and understand plant and soil-based production agriculture. NRCS should utilize CCAs to expand their delivery of technical assistance and the adoption rate of conservation practices. At the same time, by requiring professional certification for all staff that deliver or evaluate technical assistance, NRCS will increase their internal capabilities and expertise. This is not a new concept for NRCS since they already require it of other non-agronomy or soil science related staff. There is great potential to expand conservation through this partnership approach and ASA and the ICCA Program are ready and willing to partner further with USDA to do so.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

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