

WHAT IS A CAFO?

By Mary Theresa Julien

A CAFO, or Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation, is a livestock operation which confines animals for at least 45 days or more per year in an area without vegetation. A threshold number of confined animals, triggers whether a CAFO must comply with NYS management requirements. For example, in NYS a CAFO with 300 or more cows is required to follow certain management steps to reduce impacts to the environment. Such CAFOs must work with an Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) Certified Planner to develop a Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP). Planners become certified through an extensive process that involves achieving and maintaining Certified Crop Advisor (CCA) credentials and the completion of the CNMP Certification Training. Certification is a designation given by the State Conservationist of the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) in New York in consultation with the Commissioner of the NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets and the NYS Soil and Water Conservation Committee.

A CNMP provides guidelines to a farmer, such as how many gallons of waste can be safely spread, and how often, on a field of a certain size and with a particular soil type. Farmers required and/or interested in having a CNMP for their farm would develop a CNMP with a Certified Planner and, upon completion the CNMP is signed by both the Planner and the farmer.

The CNMP must:

- 💧 Meet USDA NRCS standards;
- 💧 Be in concert with the business objectives of the farm enterprise;
- 💧 Address the environmental concerns of the farm and the watershed;
- 💧 Meet the requirements of the Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) Environmental Conservation Law General Permit and the NY State Pollution Discharge Elimination System (SPDES) Clean Water Act Permit.

A CNMP is confidential. Regulatory agencies do not have a copy and farmers do not have to share them. That said, most farmers willingly allow others to view their CNMP and oftentimes, the local Soil and Water Conservation District can facilitate this. However, CAFOs are subject to annual compliance reports and periodic inspections. They are considered a “point source” of pollution. They are required to file a Notice of Intent (NOI) to do business as a CAFO in NYS, maintaining a permit in the State Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (SPDES) for the discharge of manure and process water.

CAFOs produce extraordinary amounts of animal sewage. This waste has the potential to contaminate surface and groundwater when manure is spread on farm fields, and through other farm practices and processes. Water pollution can be caused by runoff into surface waters, or by traveling through the ground, or through catch basins into field tiles or drainage ditches that discharge into surface waters. In addition to plant nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen, CAFO waste may contain hormones, pathogens, chemicals used in livestock care, ammonia and heavy metals. If these wastes contaminate a community water supply, water treatment plants must remove these nutrients before water is fit for consumption.

A Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan is designed to control and mitigate these impacts. Even so, unforeseen events, such as manure spreading before a temperature drop, can cause waste to run off frozen ground into a water source. While it is true that our vital food supply is in the hands of these farmers, so too is the stewardship of our clean water supply. Many thanks to those who are doing it right.. 💧💧

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