Nutrient management planning for California dairies

By Tanner Ehmke, contributing writer

It’s been five years since California’s EPA required dairies to write nutrient management plans to stem the flow of nitrogen (N) off farm fields. And, according to Mike Huffman, CCA with the Lyman Group in Galt, CA and chair of the California CCA board, the progress dairies have made in implementing nutrient management over the years is due in large part to help from CCAs who are charged with signing off on the state-mandated plans.

Huffman says CCAs play an important role by helping dairies operate within state guidelines to limit nutrient loss and water pollution while staying productive and profitable.

“We have to make sure they’re matching yield goals with the nutrients they produce through the manure and the commercial fertilizer that they apply,” he explains. “They still have to grow crops, but we don’t want to harm the environment. You go broke if the state shuts you down, but you go broke, too, if you can’t feed your cows.”

But complying with government water and fertilizer regulations, though, isn’t as simple as regulators might think, says Ben Nydam, CCA and dairy specialist with Dellavalle Laboratory, Inc., in Fresno, CA (pictured above). Regulations can change across different regions of the state; and water, soil, and manure can vary in nutrient concentrations over time. Managing all these variables, Nydam says, requires vigilance from the CCA.

Managing manure

Nydam notes that one of the biggest complicating factors for CCAs when matching nutrients to the farmer’s crop yield goals is that solid manure and liquid manure