



Field Days Help Farmers Make Decisions

A manure composting field day provides timely resources and information to crop producers and Ag consultants to manage crops efficiently and promote conservation

Situation: Across many conversations with farmers in Dane and Dodge counties, a question Will Fulwider, Crops & Soils Educator, often heard from smaller livestock farmers, especially grain farmers with a small beef herd, is what about manure composting? Typically, Extension or producer-led field days focused on manure handling do so on larger-scale dairy or beef systems, leaving small livestock farmers to cobble together their own methods. This lack of coverage presents manure composting as a bit of a black box. As a result, each farmer has a slightly different way of doing things - minimum pile size, number of turns, method of turning, and especially nutrient content estimations and rates of application - with few folks knowing if they are doing it right. While Extension resources exist for appropriate compost handling to retain nutrients and decrease emissions, connected outreach has been slim in recent years. Field days tend to attract more farmers interested in seeing another's operation, and present a great opportunity to push these publications and recommendations out to the public, helping to open the lid on some of the mystery of manure composting.

Response: After identifying the need for a holistic approach to manure composting that provided new information to old composting hands, yet was approachable to new folks, Will convened colleagues from the Nutrient and Pest Management Program of UW-Madison, Extension, UW-Madison CALS, and Dane County Land Conservation to form a planning committee for a field day. Soliciting advice on topics and format from farmers in the Biological Farmer Friends and Dodge County Healthy Soils, Healthy Waters farmer-led watershed groups, they identified key farmers for a panel to illustrate different composting approaches as well as researchers from UW to speak to nutrient availability of compost and best handling practices. Farmers had also shared they were unclear on rules for siting compost piles, so Land Conservation presented on proper siting.

The field day took place in the middle of corn silage harvest, an all-hands-on-deck time period for many dairy and livestock producers, but over 50 farmers and agency staff as well as trade publications such as Hoard's Dairyman, Dairy Star, and Mid-West Farm Report attended. While the audience was largely composed of farmers, and the content geared towards them, several members of Dane and other counties' land conservation departments were in attendance. Having conservation departments that are knowledgeable about their farmer's manure composting systems and can provide clear guidance on the mitigating runoff risks by proper siting, can help facilitate further adoption. There were many questions for the farmer panel, which featured a dairy farmer from southwest Dane County, a heifer operation from the northeast and a confined beef operation in the southeast. Attendees were presented a rundown of a manure compost sampling and subsequent report interpretation, the science underpinning composting, as well as different methods to tailor the system to their operations. Finally, farm host Karl Sime demonstrated his compost turner to give attendees ideas for possible equipment.

UW-Madison Extension's Agriculture Program educates and responds to the needs of the agriculture community while providing resources that promote economic and environmental sustainability in Wisconsin. We apply research to challenges facing communities and businesses.

Results: In the evaluation, many attendees mentioned the utility of the farmer panel in presenting different approaches to composting and noted it as their favorite part of the event. More importantly, in follow-up conversations after the event with several of the farmers who had initially raised the need for a composting event, they said the information provided them with a solid foundation to finally make a concrete decision on whether to try composting on their operation. A dairy farmer from Fond Du Lac County interested in composting noted that with the information on nutrient availability presented at the field day, he was able to make the decision that it wasn't worth his time/effort to dive into it with the size and nature of his operation. And a grain farmer with a small beef herd from Dodge county said, "That was exactly what I was looking for."

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Kevin Shelley of UW Nutrient & Pest Management Program demonstrating how to take a compost sample for analysis