

Cornell Extension Supports Successful Northeast Region CCA Program

By Eleanor Jacobs

The annual Certified Crop Adviser training program for the Northeast Region is scheduled for Dec. 9-11, 2008, in Waterloo, N.Y.

Thanks to the hard work and dedication of Cornell's Extension faculty in Integrated Field Crop Management, Northeast crop growers have a cadre of 299 certified crop advisers they can turn to for solid advice. The Cornell Extension faculty, all members of the Integrated Field Crop Management Program Work Team, provided the leadership and knowledge to create the Northeast Region Certified Crop Adviser (NRCCA) program and continue to support and play leadership roles in the NRCCA program and its annual training program.

The NRCCA is a voluntary education, training and certification program for people who provide advice and information on crop production, crop protection and natural resource management to farmers and other agricultural professionals.

"It (the NRCCA) lends credibility to individuals, organizations and the services they provide," says Jeff Ten Eyck, an environmental analyst and coordinator of the Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) program with the New York State Department of Agriculture and Market's Division of Soil and Water Conservation. "It's a professional organization that sets standards for individuals to meet and provides continuing education." Ten Eyck is a NRCCA board member and former chair of the board.

After the American Society of Agronomy established a national CCA program in 1992, it became important for the Northeast to "be up to speed" in certifying crop management professionals, says Bill Cox. The professor in the Department of Crop and Soil Sciences at Cornell University and a member of the Integrated Field Crop Management Extension Team, served on the national CCA board. Cox also served as the first chairman of the NRCCA board.

Under Cox's leadership, the Extension faculty, industry representatives, and government agency personnel developed performance objectives for the regional program and compiled the first CCA training manual in 1994. They wrote questions for the certification exam and conducted the first basic training to prepare people for the national and regional exams.

"The CCA program was an opportunity to upgrade the whole learning process and professionalism of the agricultural community," he says. "We put more emphasis on continuing education."

"The campus team was absolutely critical in establishment of the NRCCA program," says Don Specker, Pioneer's area agronomist for New York and New England. "They spearheaded the development and put together performance objectives. They built the program from the ground up and served in leadership positions. And, they worked to make the program more regional." In 1996 New England states joined the New York CCA program.

"Leadership roles have changed, but the Cornell Extension faculty members are a major reason why the NRCCA program is as successful as it is today," adds Ten Eyck. Certified nutrient management planners in New York State who write comprehensive nutrient management plans for Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO) must first be NRCCAs, further emphasizing the importance of the NRCCA program.

Extension faculty essential to training

The success of the NRCCA depends, in large part, upon two components: The NRCCA Training Manual and the annual NRCCA training. Cornell Extension faculty members play an integral role in developing and improving upon both.

1. The CCA Training Manual includes performance objectives in four competency areas: Crop production, integrated pest management, soil and water management, and soil fertility/nutrient management.

The performance objectives are reviewed once in four years, one competency area per year. And in conjunction with that, exam questions are updated. In recent years, team members involved in the basic training have upgraded the manual, explains Quirine Ketterings, head of the Cornell Nutrient Management Spear Program and NRCCA board co-chair. In 2002, she replaced Bill Cox on the NRCCA board of directors. She became responsible for organizing the annual NRCCA training sessions in 2003 and became co-chair of the NRCCA board in 2005.

“The new manual for the basic training goes back to the performance objectives that NRCCAs are examined on,” Ketterings says. “Each of the four areas of expertise now list performance objectives immediately followed by a description of what people are expected to know. It’s a great improvement, more user-friendly, and easily updated and distributed since each is electronically downloadable now.”

2. The annual CCA training, held for three days in December, has two tracks: basic and advanced. Basic training is for people who want to take the regional and national CCA tests to become certified. Advanced training helps certified crop advisers earn the 40 continuing education credits per two-year cycle that are required for them to remain certified. The first training session drew 120 people; these past three years, more than 180 people participated.

“The basic training involves faculty who work in field crops in different disciplines,” says Ketterings. It brings together faculty from multiple departments: crop and soil sciences, plant breeding and genetics, plant pathology, entomology, the Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program, animal science, the Pest Management Education Program (PMEP), biological and environmental engineering, and horticulture. Two members of the Extension faculty at Penn State are also involved in the training.

“For the advanced training, I work with the board to determine the final selection of topics and speakers, who often include many of the Cornell Extension faculty involved in the basic training,” Ketterings adds.

“To do the annual training without the Cornell team would be monumental,” says Shawn Bossard, executive director of Seneca County Cornell Cooperative Extension and co-chair of NRCCA since 2005. “Their contributions are tremendous.”

“The Cornell Extension faculty members are critical for the program,” says Jim Peck, president of ConsulAgr Inc., a NRCCA board member and member of the [national ICCA Board](#). “We need to have academic support for credibility of the program. The academic blends with the practical in the training.”

The faculty brings professional experience to the training, presentations and materials. “Cornell sets a high benchmark for this training,” Peck adds.

“All continuing education sessions are premier events that CCAs look forward to,” says Don Specker. That can be attributed directly to the leadership and involvement of the Cornell faculty.

“The faculty is the backbone – the driving force – of the certified crop adviser training program,” says Jeff Ten Eyck. “They got it up and running. They’re the folks we rely on to give this training.”

The annual NRCCA training reaches people beyond the region, drawing CCAs and academicians from states such as Pennsylvania. Harold Brecht of Agrotain International in Catawissa, PA, finds a wealth of information at the annual training. “The program is always well organized and well run with good instructors,” he says. “There is good dialogue between instructors and participants.”

Given the price of crop inputs, Brecht finds the soil fertility information presented at the training particularly valuable.

Raising the bar

“The objective (of the NRCCA) was to upgrade the level of subject matter knowledge related to crop production, pest management and soil/water quality by professionals in the field,” says Nate Herendeen, a CCA and former senior Extension associate with the Cornell Cooperative Extension Northwest New York Dairy, Livestock and Field Crops Team. “A second objective was to create an ethical standard for agricultural workers in sales, public service, education and crop advising.”

“With today’s investment in a crop program, farmers shouldn’t be taking advice from someone who doesn’t have the credentials provided through NRCCA,” says Peck.

“The value of the CCA certificate and member identification card continues to grow as farming becomes more technical and complex,” says Herendeen. “The requirement that agricultural environmental planners receive the basic CCA training has brought a new level of understanding of environmental issues to agricultural professionals in the field.”

The CCA program “established standards for knowledge, experience, ethical conduct and continuing education; enhanced professionalism; and promotes dialogue among those involved in agriculture and natural resource management,” says Ten Eyck.

“The Northeast Region CCA program has truly been an interdepartmental effort and has improved the extension/outreach team spirit,” says Russ Hahn, associate professor in the Cornell Department of Crop and Soil Sciences and an instructor in both the annual basic and advanced trainings. “The CCA program has also improved the working relationship with industry representatives and with governmental agency personnel.”

For a complete schedule for both the basic and the advanced trainings, see the NRCCA website:
<http://www.northeastcropadvisers.org/schedule.pdf>.

The new basic training manual is downloadable via:
<http://www.northeastcropadvisers.org/>