



4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Launches This Fall in Ontario

by Stephanie Kowalski, CCA-ON 4R NMS

The fertilizer industry has established the 4R nutrient stewardship framework in cooperation with government, researchers, customers, farm organizations, conservation groups and the public.¹ 4R nutrient stewardship encompasses modifying crop nutrients sources, rates, timing of applications, and placement methods to best fit the crop need and while helping improve water quality, focusing first on Lake Erie and its watersheds.

Many Ontario nutrient service Providers and Certified Crop Advisers (CCAs) are proud to be involved in the voluntary 4R certification program that is launching this fall in Ontario. The program consists of 37 auditable standards that the Nutrient Service Provider will be audited on over a two-year cycle by a third party auditor.

The standards are divided into the following four sections:

- 1. Training and Education** - of staff making nutrient recommendations and operators applying nutrients.
- 2. Recommendations** - ensuring they are agronomically justifiable and accurate records are kept.
- 3. Application** - ensuring nutrient applications are following recommendations, risk of loss is minimized, and accurate records are kept.
- 4. Documentation** - of all the above is kept up to date by the Nutrient Service Provider.

Under the first criteria, Training and Education, Ontario CCAs have been leading the way. There are 109 CCAs in Ontario with their 4R Specialty designation. That represents 39% of all CCAs in North America that have the 4R Specialty, even though Ontario has only 5% of the CCAs in North America. This means that there is an ample number of trusted advisors to help drive 4R forward in Ontario.

How Does the 4R Certification Program Impact Growers?

The success of this voluntary certification is highly dependent on Ontario nutrient service providers wanting to become 4R certified, and that starts at the ground level with customers. Although most of the audit standard criteria are pertinent to the Nutrient Service Provider, there are certain standards that touch growers' methods of applying phosphorus, soil sampling habits, and

acknowledgement of the program that are very important to moving the bar forward. In regard to phosphorus applications, the recommended method of phosphorus placement is below ground. This means if phosphorus is surface broadcast, it should be incorporated, unless the risk of loss is demonstrated to be low. There are also audit criteria surrounding surface broadcasting ahead of forecasted rainfall greater than one inch. This is to prevent offsite movement of phosphorus. If your nutrient service provider does apply ahead of a forecasted rainfall, it will most likely be requested that the grower incorporate that phosphate fertilizer before the rain. This is to minimize the risk of phosphorus loss.

Another impact on growers would be when their trusted adviser is required to make their nutrient recommendations from up-to-date soil samples on acres they are aiming to become 4R certified. If growers are not currently soil sampling, they can anticipate their nutrient service provider having a discussion with them surrounding the benefits of soil sampling and identifying opportunities for targeted nutrient use. The investment into soil sampling is a quick payback when fertilizer begins to go at the right rate, and right place.

A final impact on growers will simply be their acknowledgement of the program. Part of the evidence for audits is to show the grower has signed off on their crop nutrient plan and acknowledges these acres are aiming to become 4R certified. Part of these signatures also includes the acknowledgment by the grower of the nutrient service provider's confidentiality agreement. The nutrient service provider is to provide the relevant information to the auditor during audits, and only then. The grower's information will not be shared, and their data privacy respected.

One final thing for growers to keep in mind as the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program launches this fall is that it is a voluntary program for which their nutrient service provider has to choose to be a part of. Growers are not audited and do not have more paperwork to fill out. They will, however, be asked to support their nutrient service provider, and the Ontario agricultural community as we move towards a more cognisant environment of nutrient applications.

¹ 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Standards Manual. Requirements for Certification of Nutrient Service Providers in Ontario. 2017.

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There are over 600 Certified Crop Advisers (CCA) in Ontario. Each CCA has demonstrated their knowledge about Ontario crop production by passing the required exams and achieving international competency standards as set by the International CCA Program. In addition, they have the crop advisory experience, the education, the commitment to continuing education and have signed a comprehensive code of ethics, which places the grower's interests first.

This industry driven program helps ensure that Ontario crop producers are well served by those providing their crop production advice. This article was written by one of those CCA's.