Science Societies

Nester named International CCA of the Year

By Denice Rackley

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Ohio CCA Joe Nester has been named the International CCA of the year. "Being recognized by my peers, especially at this stage of the game, means more than I can express," he says. Read about Nester's life and work as a CCA.

With an agronomy career that has spanned nearly five decades, Joe Nester likely bleeds green. He admits he has more miles of walking fields behind him than he does in front of him. But this year's winner of the International Certified Crop Adviser of the Year award is quick to say that he isn't ready to toss out his muddy boots quite yet.

The beginning

In the heavy clay soils of northwestern Ohio, Nester was surrounded by agriculture. "My dad raised corn, soybeans and wheat and worked off the farm," he explains.

Farm life suited him, at least most of it. "My dad had quarter horses for pleasure. He loved them." Maybe it was trudging through feet of snow carrying water each winter, courtesy of living in Lake Erie's grasp, but young Nester didn't share his father's passion for horses. Instead, his attention centered on the fields.



With care and good fortune, seeds smaller than a thumbnail grew to reach dizzying heights in the mind of a young boy. The more he learned about agriculture, the more intrigued he became. After school and on weekends, he helped his dad with wheat, corn, or soybeans, and during school, he took every agriculture class he could.

He dove into opportunities provided by Future Farmers of America, even serving as president, but he understood that, given the size of his family farm and the price of land, farming was out of reach. However, the ag world was much larger than it looked from his window.

Nester entered Northwest State College's ag business program, and while in college, he hauled anhydrous ammonia into Sohigro fertilizer plants. When the owner of the trucks began cutting back, Nester walked into the nearest Sohigro facility looking for a job and was hired on the spot as a temporary employee.

Taking soil samples, spreading, and spraying fertilizer filled his workdays. When his manager left in the spring a couple of years later, he was concerned that the local farmer would be impacted. Nester, 23 year old, stepped in as the youngest ever Sohigro managers.

"John Solt gave me the best chance I ever had in agriculture by hiring me as manager. I was wet behind the ears with not nearly enough experience," Nester note. "I would never have hired me." Terra International bought Sohigro in 1985, but the business didn't change.

Nester said he learned many foundational lessons in his years with Sohigro and Terra International, which he credits to the great employees and patient, knowledgeable farmers he served.

The early 1990s brought increased regulations, high prices, tighter budgets, and aging equipment to the ag industry. Nester recalled that his work seemed bound by increasingly stringent regulations that multiplied paperwork and limited interactions with farmers.

“I must have been complaining more than I realized because my wife told me to stop complaining and figure it out,” he says. Encouraged by his wife, he took a chance and founded Nester Ag in 1993.

Joys and challenges of independence

The Ohio CCA program was just getting started in 1993, and Nester sat for the first-ever CCA certification exam offered in the state and passed. With spring planting already complete and growing crops in the fields, Nester spent much of the first summer and fall walking fields and collecting soil samples.

“Getting into the field more and leaving behind the ever-mounting computer work was the easy part. Giving up the regular paycheck, company pickup, 401K, and benefits was tougher,” Nester commented.



Out on his own, Nester needed a lab to run soil samples. He was referred to Brookside Laboratories, a shareholder-owned lab specializing in water quality testing, feed and fertilizer analyses, and soil testing that catered to independent advisers.

Those referrals began Nester’s relationship with Brookside, which continues today. As a write-in candidate, he was elected to Brookside’s board of directors in 2001 and served for 18 years.

Nester credits much of his success as an independent adviser to his partnership with Brookside.

Nester Ag

Nester Ag began with 7,000 acres. Now with four full-time CCAs—cousin Clint Nester, son Brad Nester, Joe Schubert, and a handful of part-time soil samplers—Nester Ag serves clients in three states and encompasses 270,000 acres.

Nester Ag uses geo-referenced soil sampling, combining years of data, farmer insights, and current research to provide recommendations. “We let the crop tell us what is happening in the field, involve farmers and the latest agronomic knowledge, and take a prove-it approach.”

Nutrient management and water quality have been primary concerns for Nester Ag, which serves many clients within the Western Lake Erie basin.

During the development of the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program, Nester helped guide the program, and in 2016, Nester Ag became the first independent consulting group to achieve 4R certification.

Contributions to the industry

Nester has worked with industry representatives, organizations, and university researchers setting up and gathering data from test plots. “Joe’s common sense and real-world experience have been instrumental in shaping many of today’s conservation and stewardship programs and have made him a valuable partner,” Clint Nester says.



Joe Nester (right) receiving the H2Ohio Lifetime Conservation Advocate Award for a career of outstanding leadership and promotion of conservation in agriculture from Ohio Department of Agriculture Director Brian Baldridge.

He has investigated edge-of-field recommendations, phosphorus runoff, and many other initiatives. “The information gained not only adds to industry knowledge, but it’s used to back up or change recommendations for our customers,” he says.

In early 2025, he received H2Ohio Lifetime Conservation Advocate Award for a career of outstanding leadership and promotion of conservation in agriculture. “Joe Nester is what I believe every crop consultant should aspire to be, providing agronomic advice while implementing nutrient management

that is both environmentally and fiscally sound," says Kris Swartz, North-Central Region Chair of the National Association of Conservation Districts.

Sharing his experiences and knowledge has always been a central part of Nesters' career. Over the years, he has served on many committees and spoken at countless industry events. "I enjoy public-speaking opportunities and the relationships I have built through traveling and speaking. Visiting with colleagues and interested farmers has helped develop my business and gives me the opportunity to promote the CCA program."

CCA program

"Joe exemplifies the very best of what the CCA program represents: technical excellence, ethical responsibility, and an unwavering commitment to advancing nutrient stewardship," says fellow CCA Aaron Heilers, Executive Director of the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program.

According to Nester, the brilliance of the CCA program hinges on two key elements—continuing education and the written code of ethics. In his view, ongoing education and the standard of conduct that CCAs agree to give farmers confidence that CCAs are always searching for ways to help them.

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ethical responsibility, and an unwavering commitment to advancing nutrient stewardship."

"After 50 years working in agriculture, you would think I would know it all. But I don't," he admits. Advancing technology, methods, and products, along with growing amounts of data, make farming more complex and challenging. But that's not all. It also makes being an adviser more complicated.

"Working in the agriculture industry isn't easy," Nester says. "Ag isn't a clock-in, clock-out 9-to-5 job. There are long days, challenging conditions and cruddy weather, tight margins, changing regulations, and always something new to figure out. But there are also vast opportunities to build a meaningful career."

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For fellow CCAs and those considering becoming a CCA, Nester recommends getting involved, challenging yourself, and building relationships in the ag industry. "Ag isn't an exact science, but it is forgiving. Mistakes offer opportunities to learn and grow, and each year is a chance to do better."

"I get up every day excited to go to work," Nester says.

ICCA award

Receiving the ICCA award is humbling and an extreme honor, according to Nester. "Being recognized by my peers, especially at this stage of the game, means more than I can express. So many people and organizations have contributed to my career and enabled me to even be considered."

In the year ahead, Nester is looking forward to opportunities stemming from the ICCA designation: traveling, attending conventions, and speaking. He plans to take every opportunity to talk about the CCA program, hoping that sharing his experiences will help advance it.

"I am not done yet, but receiving the ICCA award is a great way to finish out my career."

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