

Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program

BACKGROUND

Minnesota is the headwaters state for three continental divides – the Mississippi River (Gulf of Mexico), the Red River (Hudson Bay), and Lake Superior (Atlantic Ocean). Our lakes, rivers and streams feature prominently in our recreation and our quality of life, and the high quality of those public waters is part of what makes our state special.

In addition to our abundant water resources, Minnesota is also the nation's fifth most productive agricultural state with nearly 27 million acres devoted to agricultural production, \$15 billion in annual sales, 340,000 Minnesota jobs supported and an amazing variety of farms. In addition, Minnesota's 81,000 farmers collectively have a strong track record of embracing conservation practices and finding new ways to grow the world's food while protecting the state's natural resources.

These distinctive assets make Minnesota the ideal location for a new collaborative approach focused on the intersection between agricultural production and water quality. The goal of the new state and federal partnership, called the Minnesota Ag Water Quality Certification Program, is to enhance Minnesota's water quality by accelerating the voluntary adoption of on-farm conservation practices.

DETAILS

The Minnesota Ag Water Quality Certification Program is designed to accelerate voluntary adoption of agricultural practices that enhance water quality. It is the product of a state-federal partnership that includes the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA), the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The first step of the program is a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed on January 17, 2012, by Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, and EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson. The MOU document formalizes the state-federal partnership and confirms the joint commitment to developing and implementing the program.

Program details will be developed cooperatively in the months ahead, but the general concept is that farmers who implement and maintain approved conservation plans will be assured that their operations meet water quality goals and standards. So long as the participating farmers meet program obligations, they will not be required to implement additional water-quality practices

for the duration of their certification. Conservation plans for participating farms would be developed by a qualified team of experts with consideration given to the unique characteristics of the farm, the farming practices, the surrounding watershed, and the region in which the farm is located.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For Minnesota's lakes, rivers and streams, this program will mean cleaner water faster through the acceleration of voluntary adoption of on-farm conservation practices. This promises to have a positive and long-lasting impact on the quality of our public waters. Another benefit will be that the program will provide a clearer picture of which practices are being implemented in which locations, offering greater accountability and transparency within watersheds.

For Minnesota's farmers, participation in the program will mean formal recognition for their investment in and maintenance of the conservation practices. It will also give them greater regulatory and cost stability over the period of their certification, which will help with their business planning. This greater stability will appeal to the agricultural financial community, in that it provides lenders assurance that the farm is meeting water quality standards and less likely to incur unexpected and significant financial liabilities from new requirements. Also, the partnership is expected to result in a significant increase in federal funding and technical assistance for Minnesota farmers implementing conservation practices.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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