

Ag Water Quality Certification Program Frequently Asked Questions

1: What benefits will the Minnesota Ag Water Quality Certification Program provide to participating farmers?

In exchange for Minnesota farmers' voluntary implementation and maintenance of approved conservation plans, Minnesota's Ag Water Quality Certification Program will provide assurance that the farmers' operations meet water quality goals and standards for a specified time. This confirmation will give farmers greater certainty about conservation goals and regulatory standards, and will give them assurance that the agencies participating in the program will not require them to implement additional water quality practices for the period of their certification.

2: How will Minnesota's environment benefit from the Minnesota Ag Water Quality Certification Program?

The program goal is to enhance Minnesota's water quality by accelerating the adoption of on-farm conservation practices. These practices will have a range of water quality benefits, including reduced sediment loads and nutrient runoff.

3: How many years will participating farmers be covered under the certification?

Details of the program will need to be worked out through agency and stakeholder discussions, but the initial concept anticipates a certification period of 10 years if practices are maintained.

4: Has this type of program been tried in other states?

To our knowledge, this is the first program of its kind in the U.S. Other states have discussed similar concepts, but Minnesota is the first to have a formal agreement between state and federal agencies to move forward with an Ag Water Quality Certification Program.

5: What type of funding will be used to support this program?

The program will use both federal and state resources – including funding and technical support. Initial funding for this program will likely come from established programs while additional federal funding may be available in the future. We also anticipate some level of investment by participating farmers.

6: What other industries have quality assurance/certification programs?

Quality assurance programs can be found in many industries, from food safety to forestry to dry cleaning. A few examples of programs in Minnesota include Forest Certification from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), organic agriculture certification, the Minnesota Milk Producers Association's Environmental Quality Assurance Program, the Livestock Environmental Quality Assurance Program (LEQA) and Pork Quality Assurance.

In these programs, quality assurance refers to the monitoring and evaluation of the various aspects of an operation to verify that standards of quality are being attained.

7: How many farms will qualify for certification?

The goal of the program is to accelerate voluntary implementation of on-farm conservation practices, not merely provide validation of existing practices. Some farms may have already implemented extensive conservation practices that may fully satisfy certification requirements for their area. Other farms may need to implement additional conservation practices to become certified. Any farm willing to implement and maintain an agreed-upon conservation plan could be eligible to participate.

8: How rigorous will the on-farm assessment be?

We expect to see a rigorous program that sets the bar high, but the program details will be worked out in the months to come.

9: Can livestock producers participate in this program as well as crop producers?

The certification program is expected to focus initially on practices related to management of soil, fertilizer, pesticides and manure that are not currently regulated. Beyond that, planners will need to further develop program details. Our expectation at this point is that the program will not address areas of agricultural operations that are currently regulated.

10: Will producers still need to comply with regulations regarding pesticide applications? What other regulations, if any, will remain in place?

All existing regulations will remain in place for farmers participating in the program. This program is not about eliminating requirements, but rather about setting a high standard for water quality and conservation practices for farmers and then leaving those high standards in place for the period of certification.

11: How will the program decide upon a set of approved conservation practices?

Practices funded through the Federal Farm Bill and state programs have a set of standards that we anticipate will form the foundation of the certification process. In addition, program planners will explore how to incorporate additional conservation practices as needed into the certification process.

12: How long do you expect it will take to implement this program in Minnesota?

Details of the schedule for scoping and implementation will be resolved by the advisory committee.

13: How will stakeholders (farmers, conservation groups, local government partners and others) be involved in the program planning and development?

Stakeholder input will be essential to ensure that the program works well. The MDA will form an advisory committee that will include stakeholders from outside the partner agencies. This group will meet early in the process and help develop the program.