



# Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program

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## Information and FAQs

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### Program Background

- The Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP) is a voluntary opportunity for farmers and agricultural landowners to take the lead in implementing conservation practices that protect our water.
  - Those who implement and maintain approved farm management practices will be certified and in turn obtain regulatory certainty for a period of 10 years.
  - The incentives for participation include: regulatory certainty, recognition and priority for technical and financial assistance.
  - The program was originally piloted in four sub-watersheds across the state. The program is now expanding statewide to provide MAWQCP-certification services to any agricultural producer or landowner in Minnesota on a strictly voluntary basis.
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### Certification Process

Agricultural operations and landowners seeking certification will undergo a three step process, with assistance from local conservation professionals:

- The first step is an application to ensure and assist participants' compliance with any applicable existing laws, and to establish their priority status for financial and technical assistance.
- Secondly, the MAWQCP Assessment Tool is used to identify field-by-field and crop-by-crop any risks posed to water quality on an agricultural operation. The Assessment Tool functions as a unitless index from 0-10 with a threshold score of 8.5 eligible for certification.

The assessment process examines each parcel and crop for:

- Physical field characteristics
  - Nutrient management factors
  - Tillage management factors
  - Pest management factors
  - Irrigation management factors
  - Tile drainage management factors
  - And conservation practices
- Finally, there is a field verification to ensure all water quality concerns are addressed.

In practice, conducting assessments for Certification brings agricultural producers into a conversation with a licensed conservation professional about their resource management, production goals, and stewardship strategies.

The MAWQCP is whole-farm conservation planning that targets treatment and investment only where and as needed.

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## Frequently Asked Questions

- 1) What lessons were learned in the pilot phase?
    - Local, experienced conservation professionals connected with a SWCD best deliver certification services in sharing of information and working within an existing conservation delivery infrastructure.
    - The technical assistance (TA) needs of each operation are different and dependent upon the size of the operation, the physical features of the land, complexity of rotations and the producers' experience in water quality management.
    - The importance of local partnerships cannot be emphasized enough in implementation and delivery of the MAWQCP.
  - 2) Why has the program expanded statewide?
    - The original commitment from the Governor, USDA Secretary, and all partners was to conduct a statewide program. The stakeholder process had simply and logically recommended an initial pilot phase.
    - Assessment processes, information and technology management, administrative and financial management, and field service protocols are now in place and tested (and provisions for continuous analysis and improvement are also incorporated).
  - 3) Are you only working with the early adopters/people already doing these practices?
    - No. We are reaching a new audience. Field staff is working with, and we have certified, producers who had never sought conservation assistance before.
  - 4) How are you evaluating the program and your progress?
    - Evaluation of the program continues to measure the outcomes achieved. Currently, a three-fold evaluation is taking place accounting for:
      - 1) how water quality is impacted as measured by predictive models and actual edge-of-field monitoring,
      - 2) performance measures such as the number of producer interactions, acres assessed and conservation practices installed, and
      - 3) how knowledge and attitudes are changed as monitored through social measure surveys. As the program becomes more established, evaluation will change and expand to identify water quality outcomes.
  - 5) Will the MAWQCP actually improve water quality?
    - Our comprehensive process of conducting whole-farm assessments where physical and management risks to water quality are identified and treated to the recognized, formal standards on a parcel-by-parcel and crop-by-crop basis is literally unequaled anywhere. With MAWQCP-certification—which empowers participants and honors their commitments—the only possible outcome of identifying and mitigating water quality threats is reduced impairments and improved water quality.
  - 6) How does MAWQCP address buffers?
    - MAWQCP-certification treats the resource concern of water quality, thereby ensuring all water bodies are buffered to NRCS/SWCD site-specific standards.
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