

Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program

Topic Selection Background Information

April 2025

Program Overview	Agricultural runoff can harm lakes, rivers, streams, and groundwater. The Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (WQCP) is a voluntary program that provides incentives to agricultural landowners to implement conservation practices that protect water quality. The Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) partners with other agencies and local governments to certify program participants and support their implementation of techniques tailored to address their farms' unique water-quality risks.
Evaluation Questions	How well has MDA managed WQCP? How long does certification take? To what extent has MDA measured water quality improvements as a result of the program? To what extent has water quality improved? To what extent has MDA established and achieved sustainability and environmental outcomes for WQCP? How well has MDA complied with applicable requirements?
State Resources <i>Low</i>	Since its inception, WQCP's annual appropriation (from the state's Clean Water Fund) has increased from \$1.5 million for Fiscal Year 2014 to \$3.5 million for Fiscal Year 2025. MDA directs most of this funding to local government partners that provide technical support to agricultural landowners who are certified or seeking certification.
State Control <i>High</i>	WQCP is established in state law and MDA developed the process for assessing an agricultural producer's water-quality risks. MDA also approves the local government partners and other individuals who work directly with landowners seeking certification.
Impact <i>Medium</i>	Agricultural runoff can threaten water quality throughout the state. According to an MDA report, farms certified through WQCP have implemented new conservation practices that have prevented thousands of tons of runoff from entering Minnesota lakes, rivers, and streams every year. However, as of February 2025, fewer than 1,600 of Minnesota's more than 60,000 farms were certified through WQCP.
Timeliness <i>Medium</i>	While Minnesota's water quality is of perennial interest to legislators and the public, there is no urgent reason to evaluate WQCP this year.
Feasibility <i>High</i>	The questions posed are fairly broad; OLA may need to narrow their scope. Then, OLA could evaluate WQCP using standard evaluation techniques, including data analysis, document reviews, interviews, and surveys.
Balance <i>Medium</i>	OLA has never evaluated WQCP. OLA's most recent program evaluation related to MDA or water quality was <i>Pesticide Regulation</i> , released in 2020.
Discussion	Since MDA began administering WQCP in 2014, enrollment and interest has continued to expand. MDA reports that the program has been successful in terms of water-quality outcomes and the financial health of the participants. An OLA evaluation could help determine the value of the program and provide suggestions for the future.