
Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program

Program Evaluation Description

July 2025

BACKGROUND

Minnesota has vast water resources, including almost 12,000 lakes and over 10 million acres of wetlands. Agriculture, a key industry of the state's economy, can negatively impact water quality. The Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP) attempts to support agricultural producers in implementing conservation practices that protect water quality.

MAWQCP is a voluntary program that recognizes agricultural producers who mitigate risks to water quality across their entire operations. MAWQCP-certified producers receive assurance that they are considered in compliance with water quality regulations for ten years, recognition for their conservation efforts, and priority for technical and financial assistance.

MAWQCP began in 2012 as a federal-state partnership. In 2013, the Minnesota Legislature established MAWQCP in statute, and the program launched statewide in 2015. At the end of 2024, the program included more than 1,500 certified producers and 1.1 million acres of certified land.

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) is responsible for program administration and works with Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) across the state to implement the program at the local level.

MDA has received annual appropriations for MAWQCP from the state's Clean Water Fund. Between fiscal years 2014 and 2025, state funding for MAWQCP increased from \$1.5 million to \$3.5 million. Much of the program funding goes to SWCDs to administer the program and to agricultural producers to support their implementation of conservation practices.

EVALUATION ISSUES

1. To what extent has MDA complied with MAWQCP requirements in state and federal law?
2. How well has MDA managed MAWQCP?
3. What impact, if any, has MDA demonstrated MAWQCP to have on water quality in Minnesota?

DISCUSSION

As part of this evaluation, we will review state laws and MDA's documentation to understand the agency's management of the program. We will also interview staff at MDA and other state agencies, program certifiers, and other stakeholders to hear how MDA coordinates with program partners and stakeholders. Additionally, we will survey agricultural producers to gather their perspective on the program. We will also conduct site visits to observe the certification process and meet with SWCD staff who administer the program locally.

Beyond this, we will analyze program data and conduct a file review of documents relevant to the certification process to understand how MDA has administered key aspects of the program. We will also conduct a literature review focused on water quality and pollution reduction outcomes related to conservation initiatives or programs similar to MAWQCP.

We plan to complete the evaluation and issue a report in early 2026. For additional information, contact project manager Caitlin Zanoni-Wells at 651-296-2518 or Caitlin.Zanoni@state.mn.us.