



Summary

July 2026

Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) has not ensured that producers meet all program standards before receiving Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP) certification. Though MDA reports a number of program outcomes, MAWQCP's effect on water quality is not clear.

Report Summary

Program Certification

Statutes establish numerous requirements MDA must follow while administering MAWQCP.

- While MDA's current administration of MAWQCP does not align with all provisions in statute, some statutory requirements may be unnecessary. (p. 23)
- Statutory requirements to protect the privacy of certified producers may inhibit MDA's ability to effectively administer the program. (p. 24)

Recommendations ► The Legislature should update MAWQCP's authorizing statutes. MDA should clarify expectations for communication with regulatory agencies and require MAWQCP staff and certifiers to communicate with these agencies when necessary to administer the program. (pp. 26, 27)

Program Standards

MDA's certification process allows producers to receive MAWQCP certification with "contingencies." These producers agree to implement or maintain certain practices to meet the program's standards.

- MDA certifies producers that have not met the program's standards. Some producers certified with contingencies did not meet program standards years after certification, yet they still received the benefits of certification. (pp. 29, 31)

Recommendation ► MDA should discontinue the use of contingencies in MAWQCP certification agreements. (p. 34)

Background

The Legislature established MAWQCP in 2013 to certify agricultural producers whose practices protect water quality. MDA administers MAWQCP in partnership with program certifiers at Soil and Water Conservation Districts across the state.

MAWQCP is a voluntary program. To get certified, producers apply, and program certifiers review producers' operations and conduct in-person field verifications. Certifiers enter the producers' information into the MAWQCP assessment tool to determine whether they meet the program's standards. If producers meet the program's standards, MDA certifies the producers for 10 years. In addition to the initial assessment, MAWQCP staff conduct reviews mid-way through producers' certification periods to ensure compliance with program standards.

Since MAWQCP was established, MDA has certified over 1,600 producers and over 1.1 million acres of farmland.

- While the program conducts more mid-certification reviews than statutes require, the comprehensiveness of these reviews varies. MDA allows producers to remain certified even if their mid-certification reviews reveal that they do not comply with program standards. (pp. 36, 39)

Recommendations ► MDA should focus its mid-certification reviews on producers at the highest risk of being out of compliance with program standards and ensure producers follow program requirements. The Legislature should revise the requirement to conduct random producer audits. (p. 40)

Program Purpose and Impact

MDA reports on several program measures, including the number of certified producers, number of conservation practices implemented by certified producers, and estimated pollutant reduction.

- MAWQCP's statutory purpose is unclear. Because MAWQCP's purpose is not well defined, identifying appropriate outcome measures is challenging. (pp. 45, 46)

Recommendation ► The Legislature should clarify MAWQCP's purpose and identify intended outcomes. (p. 47)

- MAWQCP's effect on water quality is not clear. Pollution reduction estimates capture projected impacts of conservation practices, rather than the actual impact, and MDA's data on reduction estimates have significant limitations. MDA does not collect data that would allow the agency to measure MAWQCP's actual impact on water quality; however, measuring MAWQCP's impact on Minnesota's lakes, rivers, streams, and groundwater may not be feasible. (pp. 48, 51, 52)

Recommendations ► MDA should address limitations in the agency's data on conservation practices and pollutant reduction estimates, and consider ways to incorporate water quality monitoring for a selection of certified producers. (p. 54)

- Producers who responded to our survey reported that MAWQCP offers many benefits to them and few drawbacks. (p. 55)

Summary of Agency Response

In a letter dated July 8, 2026, Commissioner Thom Petersen said that MDA agrees “with many of the recommendations outlined by the report” but has “several points of clarification that we feel are important to include.” Notably, he said MDA agrees with the recommendations that the Legislature update several aspects of MAWQCP's authorizing statutes and that MDA (1) clarify expectations regarding communication with other regulatory agencies and (2) strengthen its policies for MAWQCP.

On the other hand, the commissioner said that MDA does not support discontinuing all contingencies, since they are “a critical part of each certification agreement.” However, he said MDA has and “will continue to make strides to limit the use of contingencies.” Regarding the recommendation to address limitations in the agency's data on program outcomes and consider ways to incorporate water quality monitoring, the commissioner said the agency “reports outcomes using the same methodologies applied by other state agencies, which incorporate monitoring frameworks that account for the many variables influencing ground and surface water.” Overall, the commissioner said “We acknowledge there are ways to improve this program and are incredibly proud of MAWQCP and all it has done to further our state's commitment to enhancing water quality and conservation.”