

Soil Health Financial Assistance Program 2024 Request for Proposals

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Grant Summary

Overview

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) is now accepting applications for the Fiscal Year 2024 Soil Health Financial Assistance Program. Grant funds are available for purchasing and retrofitting equipment that will assist with implementing soil health farming practices. This grant program is funded through the 2023 Legislative Session, which established the Soil Health Financial Assistance Program to support healthy soil management practices in Minnesota. This program is administered by the Pesticide and Fertilizer Management Division, Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA).

Funding availability

The MDA anticipates awarding approximately \$2.375 Million in Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 using a competitive process. One round of awards is planned, but if funding is not exhausted, a second request for proposals will be issued. Unsuccessful applicants from the first round can reapply if a second round is offered.

Applicants may apply for up to 50% of their project's total cost with a minimum grant award of \$500 and a maximum grant award of \$50,000.

An individual, farm, producer group, or LGU may only receive one Soil Health Financial Assistance Program grant in FY 2024.

Priorities

It is the policy of the State of Minnesota to ensure fairness, precision, equity, and consistency in competitive grant awards. This includes implementing diversity and inclusion in grant-making.

[Policy 08-02: Rating Criteria for Competitive Grant Review \(PDF\)](#) establishes the expectation that grant programs intentionally identify how the grant serves diverse populations, especially populations experiencing inequities and/or disparities.

This grant will prioritize:

- Emerging farmers, including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, immigrants, women, veterans, persons with disabilities, young and beginning farmers, LGBTQ+ farmers, and others
- Geographic diversity of grant awardees in Minnesota

How to apply

- Apply for the Soil Health Financial Assistance Program using our [online application system](#).
 - Grant applications must be received by **4:00 p.m. Central Time (CT) on September 15, 2023**, to be considered for funding. Late applications will not be accepted.
- Apply early so that there is enough time to receive technical assistance if needed.
 - It is best practice to submit your application at least 24 hours in advance.

The MDA is not responsible for any technical or logistical problems resulting in the MDA not receiving the application on time. It is the responsibility of the applicant to ensure that submission is received by the MDA before the deadline.

Application guidelines

- Use plain, easily understood language. Write for reviewers who are generally knowledgeable but may not have a thorough or deep understanding of your farming operation, organization, or soil health initiative.
- Answer all questions completely within the character limits specified in the grant application.
- Review the [Project Evaluation Profile](#) included in this document as it is used to score and compare the grant applications.

Timeline and deadlines

September 8, 2023, 4:00 p.m. CT	Deadline to submit questions
September 15, 2023, 4:00 p.m. CT	Applications due
January 1, 2024	Notification of decisions are made by this date

How to submit questions

For questions on the grant program or application:

- Submit your question in writing before **4:00 p.m. Central Time on September 8, 2023**.
- Email jessica.jurcek@state.mn.us or brad.jordahlredlin@state.mn.us with “Soil Health Grant” in the subject line.
- Questions and answers will be posted online on the [MDA Soil Health Grant page](#).

MDA employees are not authorized to provide advice on any applications. Applicants who solicit or receive advice from unauthorized MDA employees may be disqualified from eligibility for a grant award.

For help with the online application system:

- Call 651-802-3059 or
- Email jessica.jurcek@state.mn.us or brad.jordahlredlin@state.mn.us and include “Soil Health Grant” in the subject line.

Grant Eligibility

Eligible applicants

Applicants must:

- Be an owner or lessee of farmland in Minnesota or a LGU, including cities, towns, counties, soil and water conservation districts, Tribal Nations, and joint powers boards.

- A LGU that receives a grant for equipment purchases must make those purchases available for use by the public.
- Be in good standing with the State of Minnesota:
 - No back taxes owed
 - No defaults on Minnesota state-backed financing for the last seven years
 - Acceptable performance on past MDA grants
- Not be an employee or spouse of an employee of the MDA

Collaboration

Eligible applicants may and are encouraged to collaborate with other operations, but this is not required. If eligible organizations or operations are submitting a joint application, they must determine which individual or entity will have the grant contract agreement with the MDA and work directly with the MDA to meet grant reporting requirements. Note that this organization will receive a 1099 from the State of Minnesota for income tax purposes.

Eligible expenses

Grant applications must be for the purchase of equipment that will be used to establish, improve, or accelerate soil health. Equipment can be new or used. Parts and materials used to retrofit existing equipment (this does not include tools that can be used again on another project) may also be eligible.

If we accept your proposal, we will reimburse eligible costs included in your project budget. You will have to submit documentation including invoices and proof of payment.

- You must be invoiced and pay for all project materials and services within 12 months from the grant agreement start date.
- Any expenses incurred outside this timeframe are not eligible for reimbursement without a formal amendment to your contract.
- Any expense incurred before the grant agreement execution date will NOT be reimbursed.

Equipment purchases must:

- Aim to improve or build soil health.
- Not start until the grant contract agreement is signed by all parties and has reached its start date. No purchasing or contracting of goods may occur prior to the full execution of the grant contract agreement or effective date, whichever is later.
- Be completed in the 12-month term of the grant contract. Grant contracts can be extended if approved but cannot be extended beyond three years.
- Be conducted in Minnesota.

Examples include but are not limited to:

- Purchase of new or used equipment that will aid the producer in using soil health practices in a cropping operation.
 - Air seeders
 - No till drill
 - Drop seeders

- Broadcast seeders
- Crimpers
- Purchase of materials to retrofit existing equipment to be used for soil health practices
 - Retrofitting a corn planter to function as a cover crop seeder
 - Conditioning strips for no till planting
 - Crimper modifications

Ineligible expenses

The following items are not eligible for reimbursement under this grant:

- Expenditures incurred before the grant agreement is signed by all parties
- Crop or pastureland
- Tillage equipment and attachments, except for equipment for strip tillage.
- Tile drainage materials & equipment
- Pesticide application equipment
- General use equipment, including trucks, tractors, skid steers, and utility vehicles
- Labor incurred to establish a soil health feature or practice
- Tools, equipment rental, facilities, and fuel needed for assembly and retrofit of equipment covered by grant funds.
- Refinancing existing debt
- Late payment fees, finance charges, bad debts, legal costs, or contingency funds
- Owner and employees' wages and benefits.
- Advertising, public relations, entertainment, and amusement costs
- Donated or volunteer (in-kind) services. While these may be furnished to an applicant by professional and technical personnel, consultants, and other skilled and unskilled labor, the value of these services is not an eligible cost.
- Donations and in-kind contributions, including property and services, made by the applicant (regardless of the recipient)
- Fines, penalties, and other settlement expenses resulting from failure of the applicant to comply with federal, state, local, or Indian Tribal laws and regulations
- Indirect costs (expenses of doing business that are not readily identified with the project)
- Fundraising, including financial campaigns, solicitation of gifts and bequests, and similar expenses incurred to raise capital or obtain contributions
- Taxes, except sales tax on goods and services
- Lobbyists or political contributions
- Parking or traffic violations
- Out of state transportation and travel expenses. Minnesota will be considered the home state for determining whether travel is out of state.
- Construction or improvements outside of the state of Minnesota

The practices listed above are not an exhaustive list. Other practices not explicitly listed here may be deemed ineligible by the grant review committee or the Commissioner.

Matching funds

The Soil Health Financial Assistance Program is a reimbursement grant for up to 50% of the project cost. You must provide documentation for the total cost of the project to receive the awarded reimbursement amount.

Sources of the matching funds may include cash, loans, other grants, or liquid capital assets dedicated to the project. State grant funds cannot be used as matching funds, but non-forgivable loans from the state may be used as a match, such as the [Ag BMP Loan Program](#).

Application Review Policies

Review process

A review committee, composed of MDA staff and external reviewers, evaluates all eligible applications based on the criteria in the Project Evaluation Profile. Reviewers may recommend whole or partial funding of a project. The commissioner of agriculture reviews the committee recommendations and is responsible for award decisions. The review committee and commissioner may use geographic distribution, soil management practices, impacted acres, services to prioritized populations, applicant's history as a state grantee, capacity to perform the work, and more when making their decisions. The MDA will notify applicants, both successful and unsuccessful, in writing. Applicants may request a summary of reviewer comments.

Conflicts of interest

State grant policy requires that steps and procedures are in place to prevent individual and organizational conflicts of interest, both in reference to applicants and reviewers ([MINN. STAT.16B.98](#) and [Conflict of Interest Policy for State Grant-Making, 2022 \(Word\)](#)).

Organizational conflicts of interest occur when:

- A grantee or applicant is unable or potentially unable to render impartial assistance or advice to the MDA due to competing duties or loyalties.
- A grantee's or applicant's objectivity in carrying out the grant is or might be otherwise impaired due to competing duties or loyalties.

In cases where a conflict of interest is suspected, disclosed, or discovered, the applicants or grantees will be notified and actions may be pursued, including but not limited to disqualification from eligibility for the grant award or termination of the grant agreement.

Privacy notice and data classification

The information provided by an applicant will be used to assess the applicant's eligibility to receive a grant under the Soil Health Financial Assistance Program. The decision to apply for this grant is voluntary, and applicants are not legally required to provide any of the requested information. Applicants may decline to complete this application without any legal consequence. However, only completed applications will be considered for a grant; incomplete applications will not be considered.

Data provided in this application is initially classified by the Minnesota Data Practices Act as private or nonpublic, although some or all the data will generally become public at various points of the application process unless the data are otherwise classified by state or federal law. Access to private or nonpublic data is limited to those authorized by law, including but not necessarily limited to MDA staff and contractors with a valid work assignment to access the data, parties authorized by the applicant, parties identified in a valid court order or federal subpoena, Minnesota Management and Budget, Minnesota Department of Administration, the state auditor, and the legislative auditor. If necessary, the MDA may also share the data with law enforcement or the Office of the Attorney General.

Per Minnesota's statute on grants ([MINN. STAT. 13.599](#)):

- Names and addresses of grant applicants, and the grant amount requested, will be public data once application responses are opened.
- All remaining data in application responses (except trade secret information, see below) becomes public data after the evaluation process is completed (for the purposes of this grant, when all grant agreements have been fully executed).
- All data created or maintained by the MDA as part of the evaluation process (except trade secret information, see below) will generally be public data after the evaluation process is completed.

Procedure for claiming protection of trade secrets: Trade secret information is classified as not public data. In order to qualify as trade secret information, the data in question must be provided to the MDA by the affected person (i.e. the data must be about the applicant) and otherwise meet the legal definition found in statute ([MINN. STAT. 13.37, subd. 1\(b\)](#)). In order for an applicant to assert trade secret protection for data submitted as part of this application: the applicant must: 1) clearly identify the specific formula, pattern, compilation, program, device, method, technique or process that the applicant believes to be trade secret information; 2) describe what efforts the applicant takes to maintain the secrecy of the data; and 3) adequately explain how the data derive(s) independent economic value from not being generally known to, and not readily ascertainable by proper means by, other persons. Merely asserting trade secret protection does not, in and of itself, classify the data in question as not public; determining what data meet the definition of trade secret information is ultimately the legal responsibility of the MDA, and the MDA cannot guarantee that data identified as trade secret information by an applicant will be classified as such. If the MDA determines that data do not meet the definition of trade secret information, the data in question will be available to the public unless the applicant secures a court order saying otherwise.

All persons, businesses, and individuals applying for grants in the state of Minnesota must comply with applicable laws. Under the law titled Right of Setoff ([MINN STAT 270C.65, subd. 3](#)), a grantee consents to disclosure of its social security number, federal employer tax identification number, and/or Minnesota tax identification number, already provided to the State, to federal and state tax agencies and state personnel involved in the payment of state obligations. These identification numbers may be used in the enforcement of federal and state tax laws which could result in action requiring a grantee to file state tax returns and pay delinquent state tax liabilities, if any.

Requirements for Grant Recipients

Grant award agreement and payments

Grant contract agreement templates are available for review on the [Office of Grants Management Forms and FAQs](#) webpage.

Upon approval of an application and prior to beginning work on the grant project(s) and receiving reimbursements, the applicant is required to do the following:

- Complete an IRS W-9 form and register as a vendor in SWIFT, the state's accounting system, and submit other required documentation within 30 days of award notification.
- Sign a grant contract agreement indicating their intention to complete the proposed tasks. The agreement also authorizes the MDA to monitor the progress of the project. The grant award document must be signed within 30 days of being sent to the grantee. After the grantee signs the grant contract

agreement, the grant contract agreement will be signed by the MDA Commissioner's Office which could take another 5-7 days.

Eligible expenses may only be incurred after the contract has been signed by all parties. Grant contracts may not extend beyond three years from the effective date of the contract.

Grant funds are dispersed on a reimbursement basis. All grantee requests for reimbursement must correspond to the approved grant budget. To receive grant payments, grantees must provide proof that the equipment was purchased by submitting details of each purchase on receipts or invoices, and proof that the vendors have been paid. The grantee will receive 90% of eligible expenses not to exceed the grant award amount when they submit proof of purchase and payment. The remaining 10% will be distributed after the applicant completes reporting documents. Reporting documents can be submitted as soon as the equipment has been used for the soil health activities outlined in the grant application or up to 12 months after the contract start date, whichever comes first. Reporting documents must be submitted within 12 months of the contract start date for the applicant to receive the final 10% of the award. The reporting documents are a short form provided by the MDA requesting the number of acres on which equipment was used, a description of the soil health practice, or an explanation of why the equipment was not used within the 12-month contract length, along with other brief details about the grant award.

Site visits and financial reconciliations

The grant agreement allows the MDA to monitor the progress of the project. The MDA may perform a monitoring visit for all grantees with awards of \$25,000 or more before a final payment is approved. Other grantees may receive monitoring visits at the discretion of the MDA. The MDA may also perform a financial reconciliation of at least one invoice on grants equal to \$50,000; financial reconciliation may be performed on additional payment requests at the discretion of the MDA. For this purpose, the grantee must provide expense receipts, invoices, and any other supporting documents requested by the state.

Bidding requirements

All funded applicants will be required to abide by the state's bidding requirements for larger purchases. See a detailed list of the state's [bidding requirements](#) for details.

Affirmative action and non-discrimination policy

The grantee agrees not to discriminate against any employee or applicant for employment because of race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, status in regard to public assistance, membership or activity in a local commission, disability, sexual orientation, or age in regard to any position for which the employee or applicant for employment is qualified ([MINN. STAT. 363A.02](#)). The grantee agrees to take affirmative steps to employ, advance in employment, upgrade, train, and recruit minority persons, women, and persons with disabilities.

The grantee must not discriminate against any employee or applicant for employment because of physical or mental disability regarding any position for which the employee or applicant for employment is qualified. The grantee agrees to take affirmative action to employ, advance in employment, and otherwise treat qualified disabled persons without discrimination based upon their physical or mental disability in all employment practices such as the following: employment, upgrading, demotion or transfer, recruitment, advertising, layoff or termination, rates of pay or other forms of compensation, and selection for training, including apprenticeship ([Minnesota Rules, part 5000.3500](#)).

The grantee agrees to comply with the rules and relevant orders of the Minnesota Department of Human Rights issued pursuant to the [Minnesota Human Rights Act](#).

Audits of Purchase

The grantee's books, records, documents, and accounting procedures and practices of the grantee or other party that are relevant to the grant or transaction are subject to examination by the granting agency and either the legislative auditor or the state auditor, as appropriate ([MINN. STAT. 16B.98, subd. 8](#)). This requirement will last for a minimum of six years from the grant agreement end date, receipt, and approval of all final reports, or the required period of time to satisfy all state and program retention requirements, whichever is later.

Voter Registration Requirement

The grantee will provide voter registration services for its employees ([MINN. STAT. 201.162](#)).

Soil Health Financial Assistance Program Background and Goals

The Soil Health Financial Assistance Program was established to advance soil health in Minnesota's agricultural industry ([MINN. STAT. 17.134](#)). The Soil Health Financial Assistance Program stands out among other financial assistance opportunities because it allows producers, groups of producers, and LGUs to be reimbursed for equipment purchases. The primary goal of the Soil Health Financial Assistance Program Grant is to encourage agricultural producers to implement soil health practices by offsetting the costs of obtaining the equipment necessary to successfully engage in these practices.

Project Evaluation Profile

Evaluation Criteria	Maximum Score
<p>Equipment purchase addresses goals of the Soil Health Financial Assistance Program Grant</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Applicant clearly articulates how the equipment they plan to buy will help start, improve, or expand soil health practices in Minnesota. 	Yes/No
<p>Grant request involves retrofit of used or already owned equipment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Applicant has plans to retrofit a piece of equipment for a new, soil health-focused purpose (5 pts) 	5
<p>Diversity, equity, and inclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Applicant is an emerging farmer including historically underserved communities, such as, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, immigrants, women, veterans, persons with disabilities, young and beginning farmers (farming 10 years or fewer), LGBTQ+ farmers, and others. OR for LGU, applicant prioritizes emerging farmers (5 pts) 	5
<p>Applicant readiness, budget, economic outcomes</p> <p>Applicant:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Includes a budget that clearly details costs, including those not covered by the grant (5 pts) Clearly explains the importance of this grant to purchasing the equipment (5 pts) 	10
<p>Conservation Planning and Multiple Benefits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Applicant’s operation is actively certified or assessed and working towards certification in the Minnesota Ag Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP) and/or the equipment will be used to implement an NRCS Resource Management System (RMS) plan. OR for LGUs, organization is assisting producers with whole farm conservation planning through MAWQCP or RMS planning (15 pts) 	15
<p>Equipment is identified as having a high benefit to soil health.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The equipment being purchased or retrofitted will benefit soil health on the applicant’s operation (15 pts) The equipment being purchased will allow the applicant to incorporate a new or expand an existing soil health practice on their operation (10 pts) Explanation of how equipment will be used relates to at least one of the five Principles of Soil Health: Keep the soil covered, minimize disturbance, keep living roots in the ground, diversify rotations, integrate livestock (5 pts) 	30

Evaluation Criteria	Maximum Score
<p>Cost Efficiency Ratio</p> <p><i>Up to 25 points are possible – grant request divided by the impacted acres. If a ratio falls on the threshold between two points, award the higher point value.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 75:1 or greater (5 pts) • 25:1 – 75:1 (10 pts) • 10:1 – 25:1 (15 pts) • 5:1 – 10:1 (20 pts) • 5:1 or less (25 pts) 	25
Total	90

Application Questions

Contact information

Applicant information

- Applicant name
- Mailing address
- Mailing city
- State
- Zip code
- Applicant telephone
- Applicant email
- County

Authorized representative

If awarded a grant, the person that will sign the Soil Health Financial Assistance Program Grant contract agreement for this organization. This is often yourself or other leadership in your operation/organization.

- Name
- Telephone
- Email

Farm operation or LGU

What type of application are you submitting?

- Individual
- Group
- Local Government Unit (LGU)

Provide the address of the operation headquarters for each operation involved in the proposal.

- Name
- Address
- County

Eligibility

Confirm that the following statements apply to your organization.

- My farm and I or the LGU I represent are in good standing with the State of Minnesota. (No back taxes owed, no defaults on Minnesota state-backed financing for the past seven years, in compliance with current state regulations, and acceptable performance on past MDA grants.) (Yes)
- I am a current Minnesota resident or business authorized to farm in Minnesota. (Yes) (NA for LGU)
- I am the principal operator or have the authority to apply on behalf of the farm and no other application is being submitted from this farm. (Yes) (NA for LGU)

- My spouse and I are not employees of the MDA. (Yes) (NA for LGU)
- I have not been convicted of a criminal offense, such as theft, embezzlement, and forgery, related to a state grant agreement. (Yes)
- The MDA is unable to reimburse for any work that is performed prior to the start date of the grant contract agreement. Do you acknowledge this statement? (Yes)

Project summary

Project description

As you answer the following questions, please keep the Five Principles of Soil Health in mind:

- Keep the soil covered
- Minimize disturbance
- Keep living roots in the ground
- Diversify rotations
- Integrate livestock

What equipment do you plan to buy? If your application is for an equipment retrofit, please include those details here. *(500 characters, including spaces)*

What specific soil health practices will this new equipment allow you to implement? For example, seeding cover crops, no-till planting, low-disturbance manure application, etc. *(500 characters, including spaces)*

Please describe why this new equipment will improve soil health on your operation. OR for LGU, please describe why this new equipment will improve soil health in your area. *(1,500 characters, including spaces)*

Will this be different from your current management? If so, please explain what you will change, improve, or do differently compared to your current system. *(1,500 characters, including spaces)*

Readiness, budget, and economic outcomes

Grant request

- Total cost *(number only)*
- Total grant request (The grant reimburses for up to 50% of the first \$100,000.) Maximum award \$50,000, minimum award \$500 *(number only)*

Budget

Create a budget using the example format below. Do not attach bid sheets or quotes from vendors in lieu of providing a budget in this format. You may also upload a budget as an Excel or Word file. See the Soil Health Financial Assistance Program RFP for examples of eligible and ineligible expenses.

Online Application Example:

Item, Quantity, Cost Per Unit, Total Estimate, Source of Estimate

No till planter – new, 1, \$73,000, \$73,000, ABC Implement Dealer

Excel or Word file Example:

Item	Quantity	Cost Per Unit	Total Estimate	Source of Estimate
<i>No till planter – new</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>\$73,000</i>	<i>\$73,000</i>	<i>ABC Implement Dealer</i>

Budget narrative

(1,000 characters, including spaces)

Justify your budget and explain how you plan to pay for your equipment.

- Explain how you plan to pay for your project (financing, other grants, private investment, personal investment, or organization funds, etc.) and explain the importance of this grant to purchasing your equipment.

When do you expect to purchase your equipment? *(150 characters, including spaces)*

- Please note that these grants are for reimbursement only, and eligible purchases cannot be made until after a grant has been awarded and a grant contract agreement has been by signed by the Commissioner’s Office. We anticipate announcing awards by January 1. Once awards are announced, it can take up to two weeks for grant contract agreements to be fully signed.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion

This grant program prioritizes emerging farmers including historically underserved communities, such as, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, immigrants, women, veterans, persons with disabilities, young and beginning farmers (farming 10 years or fewer), LGBTQ+ farmers, and others. Are you an emerging farmer? OR for LGUs, does your entity/organization/soil health initiative prioritize emerging farmers? (Yes/No)

If yes, please explain. *(500 characters, including spaces)*

Impacted acres

On how many acres annually will the equipment purchased or retrofitted with funds from this grant be used? *(Number only)*

Conservation Plans and Multiple Benefits

Is your operation actively certified or assessed and working towards certification with the Minnesota Ag Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP) and/or will the equipment be used to implement an NRCS Resource Management System (RMS) plan? OR for LGUs, will the equipment further whole farm conservation planning and implementation through MAWQCP and/or RMS planning for producers? (Yes/No)

- An NRCS RMS plan is a whole farm conservation plan addressing multiple resource concerns. For example, a plan developed by participating in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) would qualify as an RMS plan. Plans for Highly Erodible Land (HEL) compliance or single resource concern plans for EQIP would NOT qualify.

If yes, please explain. Indicate your MAWQCP certification status and/or summarize your RMS plan. If you are working towards MAWQCP certification but have not been certified yet, please provide the name of the certifier

you are working with. Or for LGUs, explain how you will work with MAWQCP or RMS planning. *(500 characters, including spaces)*

If you are NOT participating in the MAWQCP but DO have an RMS plan, please upload proof of your plan. This could include a copy of your plan or a letter from your NRCS or SWCD conservationist. *(file upload)*

(Optional) Supporting documentation

You may attach up to three letters of support from someone other than yourself (e.g., Lender, Farm Business Management Instructor, Extension Educator, Consultant, Partners in a Soil Health initiative, Ag Retailer, etc.) Each letter can be no longer than two pages in length. Examples of supporting documentation may include:

- Letters of commitment written by financial institutions or other organizations that will be providing funding through loans or credit.
- Letters from your financial institutions indicating you have sufficient cash reserves to fund this project.
- Letters or documents from your agronomist or conservationist.