

Minnesota partners with farmers, and feds, on new certification program to protect water quality

by [Carolyn Orr](#) ~ November 2013 ~ [Stateline Midwest](#) »

With the goals of protecting water quality and providing regulatory certainty to farmers, voluntary state programs that certify land-management practices at agricultural operations are cropping up across the country.

Minnesota is one of the latest states to adopt such a program, and is backing it up with state dollars to help farmers adopt new conservation practices.

“This is a way to demonstrate that agriculture and water quality can coexist,” says Matt Wohlman, assistance commissioner with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. “It isn’t an either/or approach.”

These programs give farmers the chance to certify that they are reducing or controlling pollution on their farms. Once they meet water quality standards and implement state-approved conservation practices, these farmers are assured that for the length of the certification, they will not need to change their practices due to any new state regulations.

All of these state initiatives provide training and third-party verification for participating farmers, but in Minnesota — named after water and home to 11,000 lakes, 69,000 miles of rivers and 10 million acres of wetlands — the [new Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program](#) has two unique characteristics.

The first is involvement by the federal government.

In 2012, the program was [established by an agreement](#) between Minnesota and the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Environmental Protection Agency. As a result of this partnership, the USDA will provide more than \$6 million for the state’s water quality efforts.

Secondly, the Minnesota Legislature has devoted state dollars to the certification program (\$3 million in 2012 and 2013). The money comes from the Clean Water Fund, which was created in 2008 when voters passed a constitutional amendment setting aside a portion of the sales tax (three-eighths of 1 percent) to support clean water and the outdoors.

“The Clean Water Fund receives about \$100 million each year, which must be spent to protect and restore water quality,” Minnesota Rep. Rick Hansen explains. “It is the Legislature’s responsibility to appropriate the monies.”

This year, too, Hansen and other legislators codified the program with [passage of HF 976](#). It will begin in three pilot areas representing different geographical regions.

“Monitoring is an important aspect, so that we can show actual results in improved water quality,” Wohlman says. “This is why we are doing pilot watersheds first, so we can make sure we get it right.”

Participating farmers must go beyond existing requirements and adopt additional practices that address any water quality issues on the entire farm.

They will be eligible for technical and financial assistance from the state. And once their conservation practices are certified by a third party, no new state rules originating from the executive branch will be applied to these farms for 10 years.

