

vation practices to generate tradable credits. These credits, in turn, can be sold to help others meet their pollution reduction goals.

**Q. Are there additional inspections once I am certified?**

**A.** Participating farms undergo inspections at least once every three years.

**Q. Are certainty certified farms exempt from all regulations?**

**A.** No. A certified farm is only exempt from new state and local regulations for nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment enacted after the certainty agreement is signed.

**Q. What happens at the end of the 10 years?**

**A.** At the end of the 10-year period, the farm must be in compliance with all current requirements.

**Q. Can the Maryland Department of Agriculture revoke my certification?**

**A.** The department can revoke certification if a farm falls out of compliance or the operator no longer farms the parcel.

**Q. Where can I find more information?**

**A.** Visit [mda.maryland.gov](http://mda.maryland.gov) and type "certainty" in the search engine.



**Maryland Department of Agriculture**

Office of Resource Conservation

Agricultural Certainty Program  
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# Farm with Certainty

## MARYLAND'S AGRICULTURAL CERTAINTY PROGRAM



*A certification program for Maryland's top conservation farmers.*



## Farming with Certainty

Maryland farmers are leaders in conserving and protecting natural resources and the Chesapeake Bay. They take pride in their farms and their role as caretakers of the land and water. But conservation planning is a long-term commitment that can be undermined by changing environmental laws and regulations that require farmers to alter their business practices and make it difficult to plan for the future.

Maryland's Agricultural Certainty Program recognizes top conservation farmers who have gone the extra mile to stay ahead of current environmental regulations by installing best management practices on their farms that meet the Chesapeake Bay's 2025 water quality protection goals today.

Administered by the Maryland Department of Agriculture, this completely voluntary program gives farmers a 10-year exemption from new environmental regulations in return for placing highly valued best management practices on their farms that prevent soil erosion, control nutrient runoff and meet all local, state and Chesapeake Bay cleanup requirements.

## BENEFITS OF CERTAINTY

### FOR CERTIFIED FARMERS

- A 10-year exemption from new environmental regulations
- Recognition that your farm is protecting water quality
- Pre-qualification for nutrient trading

### FOR MARYLAND'S NATURAL RESOURCES

- Protection from nitrogen and phosphorus runoff into local streams, rivers, and the Chesapeake Bay
- Protection from sediment pollution entering waterways
- Habitat improvements for wildlife, underwater grasses and aquatic life

## How Certainty Works

- **Farmers who want to become certified** by Maryland's Agricultural Certainty Program work with their local soil conservation district and a Maryland Department of Agriculture certified verifier to complete an application.
- **To participate, farmers must:**
  - Implement an up-to-date Nutrient Management Plan and file required annual implementation reports with the department.
  - Implement a Soil Conservation and Water Quality Plan, also known as a Farm Plan, that addresses all natural resource and water quality concerns on the farm to control nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment runoff.
- **A field evaluation and review of farm records will be conducted** by a certified verifier to determine compliance with federal, state and local environmental requirements using the Maryland Nutrient Tracking Tool. This tool uses the same environmental standards developed by the department for the Nutrient Trading Program. As an added benefit, qualifying farmers are automatically pre-qualified to participate in the state's Nutrient Trading Program. A representative from the Maryland Department of the Environment may assist in the field evaluation.
- **If approved, the farm is exempt for a 10-year period** from meeting new regulatory programs or standards that address nitrogen, phosphorus or sediment runoff. At the end of the 10-year period the farm must be in compliance with all current requirements.
- **Every three years**, a certified verifier will inspect the farm to make sure it is following the requirements spelled out in the agreement. The Maryland Department of the Environment may take part in this review. Additionally, farmers are required to submit nutrient management records, soil analyses and other data annually.



## Become a Certainty Certified Farm

Follow this three step process to begin farming with certainty. Local soil conservation professionals will provide assistance throughout the certification process.

### STEP 1: APPLY

Farmers work with their soil conservation district or certified verifier to complete the application. Before applying, farmers should make sure that their Farm Plan and Nutrient Management Plan are up to date and fully implemented. Be prepared to demonstrate that all potential nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment losses from the farm have been addressed.

### STEP 2: FARM REVIEW

A farm assessment and evaluation will be performed to confirm that the farm meets the highest water quality standards along with all federal, state and local requirements. The Farm Plan, Nutrient Management Plan, and other farm management practices will be evaluated using the Maryland Nutrient Tracking Tool to ensure that pollution reduction goals for nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment have been met.

### STEP 3: CERTAINTY CERTIFIED

Once a certainty agreement has been signed, qualifying farms will be exempt for a 10-year period from complying with new regulatory programs or performance standards to address nitrogen, phosphorus or sediment runoff. Every three years, a certainty verifier

will inspect the farm to make certain that best management practices are being maintained to protect water quality. The Maryland Department of the Environment may participate in this evaluation. At the end of the 10-year period, farmers must be in compliance with any state or local law that has passed during their certainty period. Certified operations also may choose to be publicly recognized as a Maryland Agricultural Certainty Certified Farm.

## Types of Best Management Practices Installed

The Agricultural Certainty Program provides Maryland's top conservation farmers with assurances that future regulations won't impact their businesses for a period of ten years. In exchange, farmers install all best management practices outlined in their Farm Plans to protect waterways from nutrient and sediment runoff. Examples of protective practices recognized by the program include:

- Cover Crops
- Grassed Waterways
- Livestock Exclusion
- Critical Area Plantings
- Grass Buffers
- Tree Buffers
- Wetland Creation
- Conservation Tillage



## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

### Q. Who is eligible to participate in Maryland's Agricultural Certainty Program?

**A.** Any farmer who operates a farm in Maryland. Farmers must own or lease the land that they plan to enroll. Farms identified as Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) by the Maryland Department of the Environment are not eligible for this program.

### Q. Do I have to enroll all of my land?

**A.** Farmers must enroll an entire parcel of land as identified by the Maryland Department of Assessments and Taxation. They do not have to include all land that they farm.

### Q. Once I apply, what kinds of inspections will be performed?

**A.** A certified verifier will conduct a field evaluation, records review and assessment using the Maryland Nutrient Tracking Tool to confirm that the farm meets the Chesapeake Bay's 2025 Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) pollution reduction thresholds. As part of this evaluation, the applicant's Farm Plan will be evaluated to verify that all best management practices have been installed and are working properly. In addition, the applicant's Nutrient Management Plan will be assessed to confirm that it is current and complies with Maryland's nutrient management regulations. A Maryland Department of the Environment representative may participate in the field evaluation.

### Q. What if I just want to see if my farm meets the Total Maximum Daily Load requirements?

**A.** A "farm evaluation only" review can be used to determine if the farm has already met its pollution reduction goals. Farms that pass this evaluation are pre-qualified for nutrient trading. The Maryland Department of the Environment does not participate in this review.

### Q. What is Nutrient Trading?

**A.** The Nutrient Trading Program is a voluntary, public marketplace for the sale and purchase of nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment credits. Farmers can modify their farm management or install additional conser-