

STATE OF MARYLAND
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
APPLICATION FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Healthy Soils Competitive Fund FY 2026

GENERAL INFORMATION: Producers in Maryland have long been national leaders in on-farm conservation. With the early and widespread adoption of conservation practices including cover crops and no-till they have long shown their commitment to environmental stewardship and soil health. The Healthy Soils Competitive Fund seeks to strengthen and expand that leadership by inviting producers to propose new and innovative management of conservation practices for their farms, amplifying their proven stewardship of soil and water resources, and building soil health knowledge in the agricultural community.

Maryland legislation defines soil health as the continuing and expanded capacity of the soil to function as a biological system, increase soil organic matter, improve soil structure and nutrient and water holding capacity, and sequester carbon and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Healthy soils have water and climate benefits, can increase resilience, and can improve farm profitability.

The Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) invites applications from interested producers and organizations working with farmers looking to take their conservation and soil health work to the next level through innovative practice implementation supporting expanded soil health as defined above, and which propose systems that minimize soil disturbance, maximize soil cover, maximize biodiversity, and maximize the presence of living roots.

Since its inception in 2023 the Healthy Soils Competitive Fund has funded 53 projects across the state. Awarded projects have included, but are not not limited to, intensive cover cropping combined with alternative inputs to reduce synthetics use in row crops, equipment and field trials for reduced tillage in vegetable production systems, silvopasture and windbreak establishment for livestock shade and forage, on-farm composting system improvements, and annual cover crops for improved summer grazing.

Instructions for submitting an application, ranking criteria for proposal selection, tips for grant applicants, and an application checklist detailing required supplemental materials are included in this document.

ELIGIBILITY: The following are eligible to apply - Individual farmers operating in Maryland, groups of farmers operating in Maryland, and individuals or organizations working with farmers in Maryland. Participating farmers will need to be identified by the applicant and included in the project narrative.

The agricultural operation(s) applying, or the agricultural operations partnering with an individual or organization to apply must have a gross annual income of \$2,500 or more (or \$2,500 or more of donated agricultural products if a non-profit entity) and/or manage 8 or more animal units (8,000 pounds of live animal weight).

Applicants must provide proof of compliance with Maryland's nutrient management requirements at the time of application in the form of a Current Nutrient Management Plan Certification. If you have any questions about compliance, please contact the regional nutrient management specialist serving your county.

- There are no minimum or maximum acreage requirements for application and enrollment in the program.
- Funds may be used to support the implementation of conservation practices, including the purchase of equipment, to cover project appropriate staff and administrative time, and to cover research costs.
- Applicants are encouraged to rent equipment or purchase used equipment where possible and to use matching funds to make equipment purchases. We acknowledge, however, that some projects may only be completed using Healthy Soils funds to procure equipment, and that certain equipment may only be available new. If this applies to your project, please thoroughly explain the justification and lack of alternatives in your narrative response.
- The applicant should, to the greatest extent practicable and consistent with Federal law, provide a preference for the purchase, acquisition, or use of goods, products, or materials produced in the United States.
- Labor included in application budgets must be directly related to project implementation and should not be connected to existing activities, general farm operations, or the long-term implementation of practices.
- This grant may be used to support and expand on programs available through Soil Conservation Districts (SCDs) however, the funds may not be used to pay for the same practice(s) on the same acre(s).

INELIGIBLE EXPENSES: All expenses must directly relate to project implementation.

This grant opportunity is not intended as a source of start up or operating funds for farm operations, or operating budget for organizations.

- Overhead or indirect expenses are ineligible
- Livestock and imported livestock feed are ineligible
- Soil fertility and liming inputs are ineligible

MAXIMUM AWARD: The Healthy Soils Competitive Fund has a maximum award of **\$50,000** to support 3 years of conservation practice management. For each award, a portion of the funds (**not to exceed 30%**) will be distributed upfront after signing the agreement. The remainder will be distributed annually in the spring, upon verification of progress, for a total of four payments over the course of the grant period. Funding to support the purchase of equipment will include additional terms and conditions.

ADDITIONAL DETAILS: Applicants must be willing to allow MDA representatives and their designees to collect soil samples or other relevant data to evaluate the soil health outcomes of the practice(s). These expenses will be covered by MDA. Depending on the applicant's goals, the project proposal may include other sampling and analysis activities at the applicant's expense. The applicant should expect an annual site visit from MDA or their designee in the spring of each project year to verify practice implementation. Applicants must be willing to provide to the Department farm specific information to support climate benefit calculations, e.g. COMET Farm carbon calculations.

Required documentation of project expenses and implementation records will be discussed prior to verification and detailed in the grant agreement. Any producer wishing to extend their project after year three or expand their project during the grant period may reapply during the annual application period.

DEADLINE: The Healthy Soils Competitive Fund will accept applications from **November 3, 2025 until January 9, 2026 at 5:00 pm EST**. Grant awards will be announced and all applicants notified on or around **March 30, 2026**. Application package requirements are outlined on page 4.

For questions about the application process or the grant opportunity please contact:
Nick Miller, MDA's Healthy Soils Program Specialist, at nicholas.miller2@maryland.gov , or 410-980-2350 (cell) 410-841-5866 (office)

Required Application Materials Checklist:

Note: Applications will not be accepted for consideration without all required materials. Please submit the following as Word, Excel, or PDF documents via email, or print and mail to the address below. Narrative, Budget, and Practice Templates are available on the Healthy Soils website under Application Forms

- ☐ Farm information section is complete, signed, and dated
- ☐ Project narrative is complete and attached
- ☐ Project budget is complete and attached
- ☐ Grazing template is complete and attached (if applicable)
- ☐ Tree and shrub template is complete and attached (if applicable)
- ☐ Grass and forb template is complete and attached (if applicable)
- ☐ Cover crop template is complete and attached (if applicable)
- ☐ Detailed farm maps(s) showing field(s) where practice implementation is planned are attached
- ☐ Recent (less than 3 years old) soil sample for project field(s) is attached
- ☐ Letters of support from technical advisors (if applicable)
- ☐ [Current Nutrient Management Plan Certification Form](#) is attached. Certification of compliance with nutrient management must be current at time of application **no exceptions will be made.**
- ☐ Completed application packet is returned to MDA by **January 6, 2026 at 5:00 pm EST** by email to nicholas.miller2@maryland.gov or mailed (postmarked by January 6, 2026) to:

Maryland Department of Agriculture
attn: Nick Miller, Room 307
50 Harry S. Truman Parkway
Annapolis, MD 2140

Eligible Conservation Practices:

NOTE: Applications are **NOT** limited to the listed examples but practices should align with NRCS practice specifications

Cover Crops: Plants generally grown to recover unused plant nutrients from the root zone, control soil erosion, suppress weeds, and improve the soil

Examples: Cover crops that are not eligible for existing state funds because of species mix or planting rates, summer cover crop

***Include completed cover crop template with application**

Conservation Tillage: Limiting soil disturbance activity to manage the amount, orientation, and distribution of crop and plant residue on the soil surface

Examples: Transition to no-till adaptive management, strip till, reduced tillage system

Adaptive Grazing: Managing the harvest of vegetation with grazing and/or browsing animals. Implementation of this practice requires the development of a grazing plan.

Examples: Intensifying animal rotation, increasing paddock rest period

***Include completed grazing template with application**

Pasture and Hay Planting: Establishing adapted and compatible species, varieties, or cultivars of herbaceous plantings suitable for pasture or hay production

Examples: Establishment of diverse pasture or alternative hay species

***Include completed grass and forb template with application**

Conservation Cover: Establishing and maintaining permanent vegetative cover.

Examples: pollinator strips, diverse orchard or vineyard alleyways, native species establishment

***Include completed grass and forb and/or tree and shrub template with application**

Critical Area Planting: Establishing permanent vegetation on sites with, or expected to have, high erosion rates, and on sites that have conditions that prevent the establishment of vegetation with normal practices

Examples: Diverse native grassy or woody vegetation on marginal lands

***Include completed grass and forb and/or tree and shrub template with application**

Conservation Crop Rotation: Growing different crops in a planned sequence on the same field to increase biodiversity

Examples: adding perennial crop to rotation, adding high residue crop to rotation, increasing crop rotational diversity

Nutrient Management: Managing the amount, source, placement, and timing of plant nutrients and soil amendments while reducing environmental impacts

Examples: Grid soil sampling, variable rate nutrient application, precision application, replacing synthetic nutrient applications

Integrated Pest Management: A site specific combination of pest prevention, pest avoidance, pest monitoring, and pest suppression strategies

Examples: Pest and disease monitoring, precision pest management to reduce pesticide inputs

Soil Carbon Amendment: Application of carbon-based amendments derived from plant materials or treated animal byproducts. Material source, analysis, and application rate must be accounted for in the farm's nutrient management plan. Materials that provide primary nutrients must have a current registration with the Maryland state chemist.

Agroforestry: Implementation of any of the following practices:

***Include completed tree and shrub template with application**

- **Alley Cropping:** Plantings consisting of trees or shrubs in rows or corridors with alleys of agronomic crops or forage between
- **Hedgerow Planting:** Establishment of dense vegetation in a linear design to achieve a natural resource conservation purpose
- **Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment:** Plantings of single or multiple rows of trees or shrubs that are established for environmental purposes
- **Silvopasture:** Production of trees, forages, and livestock on the same acreage at the same time
- **Tree and Shrub Establishment:** Planting seedlings or cuttings, seeding, or creating conditions that promote natural regeneration

Application Ranking:

Applications will be ranked based on the following criteria:

1. The proposed project ensures continued and enhanced soil health, defined as the continuing and expanded capacity of the soil to function as a biological system, increase soil organic matter, improve soil structure and nutrient and water holding capacity, and sequester carbon and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Points are awarded based on how directly the proposal addresses soil health as defined above and how clearly the proposal presents a soil health system focused on minimizing disturbance, maximizing soil cover, maximizing diversity, and maximizing the presence of living roots. A proposal that addresses one principle in a thoughtful way can score just as well or better than a proposal that addresses more than one principle incidentally. **(10 points)**
2. The proposed project inspires confidence that appropriate technical assistance is being leveraged to ensure project success, and that the proposed practices will be implemented with a reasonable degree of permanence. **(5 points)**
3. The proposed project demonstrates an innovative approach to improving soil health that represents a meaningful change in the farm production system, and which is not fully supported by existing programs offered by the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) or Maryland Agricultural Water Quality Cost Share (MACS). **(5 points)**
4. The project budget shows the applicant has evaluated their needs and accounted for them appropriately. Points are based on how well the budget (both in total funds requested and breakdown of expense categories) meets the stated goals of the project and aligns with the project narrative. **(10 points)**
5. The project demonstrates a potential for greenhouse emission reduction and/or enhanced carbon sequestration data (e.g., increases in organic matter or soil organic carbon, reduction in number of equipment or tillage passes, reduction in carbon intensive inputs, etc.) Points are based on quality of the applicant's description of potential greenhouse gas emission reductions or carbon sequestration as compared with their current production system, rather than total numerical reduction potential based on proposed acreage. **(10 points)**
6. The operator clearly explains how the outcomes of the proposed project can be shared, and have the potential to influence other on-farm operations and expand knowledge of successful implementation of soil health practices. The applicant shows that they have a specific plan to work with MDA to share project successes and lessons learned. They have addressed follow up, data collection, evaluation, and outreach in a detailed manner. **(10 points)**

Tips for Grant Applicants:

- Ensure your project narrative speaks to the 4 soil health principles (as appropriate) - Minimizing disturbance, Maximizing Soil Cover, Maximizing Biodiversity, and Maximizing Presence of Living Roots. Clearly explain. If focusing on one principle, ensure other principles are not negatively impacted.
- Be specific - fully explain the project implementation - assume the audience needs every detail to understand. Consider having someone unfamiliar with your farm read your application materials. If they have questions, chances are the review committee will be left with questions as well.
- This grant opportunity is looking to fund innovative approaches to improving soil health. Projects with a clear funding pathway through existing SCD or NRCS programs may not rank well.
- Include as much detail as possible in attached project maps, including placement of plantings and other practices.
- If requesting funds for a specific product or equipment, please provide make and model information and specific technical details. Clearly detail how the equipment will allow you to meet your soil health goals.
- Explain plans for all three years of the grant period. Include detailed field maps to illustrate planned practices. Include photos to help illustrate your planned practice implementation.
- Include technical expertise supporting practice implementation to help ensure project success and permanence. Who are you working with and/or where is technical knowledge needed for project success coming from? Submit letters of support from any technical advisors.
- Fully explain outreach and information sharing plans - show you have a plan. Are you collaborating with farmer networks, hosting a session at a conference, or hosting a field day? Be specific and detailed.
- Fully explain any estimates or methods of carbon sequestration or GHG reduction potential associated with your project in whatever terms fit the proposed scope of work.
- Ensure the budget accounts for all needs for project establishment and continuation over the three year period and aligns to the project narrative. Ensure the financial ask is appropriate for the work being proposed.
- Show matching funds in the budget where applicable - likely to be some of your own funds involved in the project - labor, equipment, etc. Note if other fund sources (e.g. NRCS, MACS, SARE) are expected to be leveraged.
- Make sure you have a current Nutrient Management Plan at time of application. If you have questions about Maryland's nutrient management requirements please contact the regional nutrient management specialist serving your county.



**Maryland Department of Agriculture
Healthy Soils Competitive Fund Application
Farm Information Section**

*Please download this form, complete the fields and attach with your application packet.

Section 1: Applicant Information

Name of Applicant:

Farm/Business Name(s):

Phone Number:

Email Address:

Mailing Address:

Maryland County(s) where project will be installed:

SDAT Account Number(s)(district and account identifier) of all project sites:

Applicants must submit map(s) of the locations described above with application materials

Project Implementation Acres:

Section 2: Self Identification

Information provided in this section will not influence applicant ranking and is collected for record keeping purposes only.

Do you Identify as:

Black, Indigenous, or as a Person of Color? Yes No

A Woman? Yes No

Are you:

A veteran? Yes No

A new or beginning farmer (<10 yrs of experience)? Yes No

Section III: Participant Expectations

The participant shall:

Commit to 3 years of practice implementation or research on the same field(s) as identified on the application form;

Allow for the collection of soil assessment data on the participating field(s) with MDA representatives or their designees; and

Allow MDA representative(s), upon reasonable notice, to visit the project at any time during the project life.

Public Information Notice

The principle purpose of this application is to identify whom MDA intends to give State funds. If you fail to provide the requested information, MDA may not provide you with funds. You have the right to inspect, amend, or correct personal information collected by MDA. Much of the personal information collected by MDA is available for public inspection. This information is not routinely shared with state, federal, or local governments.

Certification

I understand that I am not guaranteed grant funds until I have received a letter of approval and a copy of my signed and dated agreement from MDA. In order to receive payment for implementation of this practice, I acknowledge that I must be in compliance with the State's nutrient management requirements (Md. Agric. Code Ann., §§8-801—8-806 and COMAR 15.20.06-08).

Signature

This document may be executed in multiple counterparts, each of which shall be deemed original, and all of which together shall constitute one and the same instrument. Signatures provided by electronic means including, by way of example and not of limitation, facsimile, Adobe, PDF, and sent by electronic mail, or via an electronic signature program, shall be deemed original.

Signature:

Date:

Print Name :