



**STATE OF MARYLAND**

**MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

APPLICATION FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Healthy Soils Competitive Fund 2025

**Program Description:**

**GENERAL INFORMATION:** Producers in Maryland have long been national leaders in on-farm conservation. With the early adoption of conservation practices including cover crops and reduced tillage they have long shown their commitment to environmental stewardship and soil health. The Healthy Soils Competitive Fund seeks to strengthen that leadership. Producers will be able to propose new and innovative management of conservation practices for their farms, amplifying their proven stewardship of soil and water resources, and building on soil health knowledge in the agricultural community. In addition to climate benefits, healthy soils have water quality benefits, can improve farm profitability, and increase resilience.

In 2024, the Healthy Soils Competitive Fund received 57 applications and 23 grantees were ultimately selected. Projects funded in 2024 included, but were not limited to, intensive cover cropping combined with alternative inputs to reduce synthetic nutrients in row crops, equipment and field trials for reduced tillage in vegetable production systems, silvopasture and windbreak establishment for shade and forage, on-farm composting system improvements, and annual cover crops for improved summer forage. Please visit the program [website](#) for examples of awarded projects.

Available funding for the Healthy Soils Program is up to \$900,000 for the 2025 cycle.

**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 eligible conservation practices are described on pages 4-5. Applicants may select one or more conservation practices. **You must provide proof of compliance with Maryland's nutrient management requirements when you submit your application.** 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, nor is farm size a criteria for project selection. 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. No overhead or indirect funds not associated with the project as outlined in the application documents will be eligible. This grant opportunity is not intended as a source of start up funds for farm operations, or operating budget for organizations. This grant may be used to support and expand on programs available through Soil Conservation Districts (SCD) and the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS); however, the funds may not be used to pay for the same practice(s) on the same acre(s). Any proposed budget item must be clearly explained and justified in the narrative portion of the application.

**MAXIMUM AWARD:** The Healthy Soils Competitive Fund has a competitive application process with a maximum award of **\$50,000** to support 3 years of new and innovative conservation practice management. For each award, a portion of the funds (not to exceed 40% and based on project scope) 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.

The Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) invites applications from interested producers and organizations working with farmers wishing to take the next step in improving soil health. Instructions for submitting an application, ranking criteria for proposal selection, tips for grant applicants, and an application checklist detailing the necessary materials are included in this document.

**ADDITIONAL DETAILS:** Applicants must be willing to allow MDA representatives and their designees to collect soil health assessment data, and the Maryland Soil Health Card on their farm operation. 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 and discuss successes and challenges. 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 to receive additional funding may reapply during the annual application period.

**DEADLINE:** The Healthy Soils Competitive Fund will accept applications from **December 2, 2024 until March 7, 2025 at 5:00 pm EST**. Grant awards will be announced after the application period closes and before **May 30, 2025**. Application package requirements are outlined on page 3.

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](mailto:nicholas.miller2@maryland.gov) , or 410-980-2350 (cell) 410-841-5866 (office)**

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Healthy Soils Competitive Fund 2025

Required Application Materials Checklist:

**Note: Applications will not be accepted for consideration without all required materials**

- Farm information section is complete (pages 6-7)
- Project narrative is complete and attached (pages 10-11)
- Project budget is complete and attached (pages 12-13)
- Farm map showing field(s) where practice implementation is planned is attached
- Prescribed Grazing Plan (if applying for funds to support prescribed grazing)
- Proposed tree and shrub planting list (if applying for funds to support Agroforestry practices)
- Proposed cover crop species planting list and intended establishment/termination time frame/method (if applying for funds to support Cover Crops practice)
- Recent (within 3 years) soil sample or current Nutrient Management Plan recommendations (if applying for Soil Carbon Amendment or Nutrient Management practice for application of materials containing nitrogen or phosphorus)
- Nutrient Management Plan, [Current Plan Certification Form](#), or conditional exemption is attached for all participating farms. Certification of compliance with nutrient management must be current at time of application.
- Completed application packet is signed and returned to MDA by **March 7, 2025 at 5:00 pm EST** by email to [nicholas.miller2@maryland.gov](mailto:nicholas.miller2@maryland.gov) or mailed (postmarked by March 7, 2025) to:

Maryland Department of Agriculture,  
attn: Nick Miller, Room 307  
50 Harry S. Truman Parkway  
Annapolis, MD 21401

**STATE OF MARYLAND**  
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APPLICATION FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE: ELIGIBLE CONSERVATION PRACTICES  
Healthy Soils Competitive Fund 2025

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, or summer cover crop

**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

**Prescribed 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

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

*Examples:* Overseeding, native perennial grasses

**Conservation Cover:** Establishing and maintaining permanent vegetative cover.

*Examples:* pollinator habitat, orchard or vineyard alleyways, native species establishment

**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:* Native vegetation, small scale permanent cover

**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

**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 with organic ones *\*not intended to pay for basic soil fertility inputs*

**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:

- **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



**Maryland Department of Agriculture  
Healthy Soils Competitive Fund Application  
2025**

For MDA use  
Agreement #:

**Section I: Applicant Information**

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Name of Applicant:

Name of Farm or Business:

Phone #

Email Address:

Mailing Address:

City:

State:

ZIP Code:

This project is to be installed on land in

County, described as:

Parcel Account

Parcel Account # Search <https://apps.planning.maryland.gov/finderonline/>

Acreage for Practice Implementation:

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

**Section II: Self Identification**

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

Do you Identify as:

Black, Indigenous, or as a Person of Color?

Yes

No

A Woman?

Yes

No

A veteran?

Yes

No

A new or beginning farmer (<10 yrs of exp)?

Yes

No

### Section III: Participant Expectations

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The participant shall:

1. Commit 3 years of practice implementation or research on the same field(s) as identified on the application form;
2. Allow for the collection of soil assessment data on the participating field(s) with MDA representatives or their designees; and
3. 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).<sup>2</sup>

#### 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:

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APPLICATION FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE: APPLICATION RANKING

Healthy Soils Competitive Fund 2025

**Submitted applications will be ranked based on the following criteria:**

1. The proposed project ensures continued and enhanced soil health. Soil health is 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. 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. A proposal awarded full points in this category would inspire confidence that proposed practices will be implemented with a degree of permanence and demonstrates an innovative approach to improving soil health that has the potential to influence other on-farm operations and expand knowledge of successful implementation of soil health practices.  
**(20 points)**
2. A budget is submitted that 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. **(10 points)**
3. Potential 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, COMET, etc.) are provided with a narrative explanation. 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)**
4. The operator clearly explains how the outcomes of the proposed project can be shared or demonstrated with other operations. The applicant shows that they have a plan to work with MDA to share project successes and lessons learned. They have specifically addressed follow up, evaluation, and outreach describing how they intend to use project outcomes in a detailed manner. **(10 points)**

**Note, in addition to the four criteria, additional consideration will be given to projects where environmental justice impacts on "overburdened" and "underserved" communities, as defined in §1-701 of the Maryland Environment article, are absent or minimized.**



## Tips for Grant Applicants

- In the project narrative consider the 4 soil health principles (as appropriate) - Minimizing disturbance, Maximizing Soil Cover, Maximizing Biodiversity, and Maximizing Presence of Living Roots. If focusing on one principle, ensure other principles are not negatively impacted.
- Be specific - fully explain 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 will not rank well without adequately demonstrating the need for additional funding support.
- If requesting funds for a specific product or equipment, please provide brand and specification 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 field maps to illustrate planned practices.
- Include technical expertise where appropriate to help ensure project success and permanence. Who/where is technical knowledge needed for project success coming from? Consider submitting a letter of support from your technical advisor.
- 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 successful project establishment and continuation over the three year grant period is aligned with the project narrative. Ensure the total 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, SARE) are expected to be leveraged.
- Make sure you have a current Nutrient Management Plan at time of application. If you are unsure whether your farm meets the requirements to maintain a nutrient management plan please contact the [regional nutrient management specialist serving your county](#).

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APPLICATION FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE: PROJECT NARRATIVE  
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Applications to the Healthy Soils Competitive Fund will be assessed based on the submitted project narrative and project budget. Possible points awarded are listed above in the section titled "Application Ranking." In order to score highly you must address each question listed below in the project narrative with as much detail as possible. **Please complete the project narrative and submit as an attachment. Please address the following nine questions in as much detail as possible.**

**Note: Applications which do not answer all relevant narrative questions will not be accepted for consideration.**

1. Please describe your soil health journey and goals. What have you achieved and where are you going? What challenges are you facing in your operation keeping you from achieving your soil health goals?
2. What practice(s) are you proposing to adopt to address these challenges?
3. How do you plan to manage the proposed conservation practice(s)? If appropriate for your project, include a timeline illustrating how your practice(s) will be implemented over the three year grant period.
4. How will managing the proposed conservation practice(s) in this way address the challenges you are facing? What are you hoping the soil health outcomes will be? What are you hoping to improve in your farming operation?
5. How will the proposed management sequester carbon and/or reduce greenhouse gas emissions as compared to past management practices? How are you estimating the benefits (e.g., increases in organic matter or soil organic carbon, reduction in number of equipment or tillage passes, reduction in carbon intensive inputs, COMET modeling, etc.)?
6. How will you or other farmers potentially benefit from the outcomes of the proposed project? Do you plan on expanding implementation to other fields in your operation or sharing information with other farmers in the future? Please provide details.

7. How will project success be measured, recorded, and shared with MDA over the course of the grant term? How would that information be shared with the wider agricultural community?(e.g., data sharing, hosting a field day, or being a part of another information sharing event)
  
8. If you are proposing a research project or working with a group of farmers, what farms are you working with? Please be sure to identify specific partners and submit maps of implementation.
  
9. Are you currently, or have you tried to work with your county's SCD or NRCS to fund aspects of this project? If yes, describe secured funding and how new financial assistance from MDA will support existing work on your farm. Describe how this grant will fill gaps in available funding.

**APPLICATION FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE: PROJECT Budget  
Healthy Soils Competitive Fund 2025**

**Please complete the project budget table below or attach a budget document that includes all items below.** Outline expected costs of implementation over the next three years. Costs described should be specific to the proposed practice(s) and associated management. No overhead or indirect costs are eligible. Only complete rows as necessary, as not every item listed will be relevant to every application. Be sure that the submitted project narrative and budget justify one another, and that the budget is appropriate for the proposed scope of work.

<b>Item</b>	<b>MDA Grant Request</b>	<b>Other funding sources</b>
<b>Labor Cost \$</b>  <b>(include estimated labor hours)</b>		
<b>Fringe/Benefits \$</b>		
<b>Materials \$</b>		

<b>Direct Expenses \$</b>		
<b>Subcontractor \$ (include sub-contractor name and value of service)</b>		
<b>Travel \$  (itemize by mileage, meals, lodging, etc.)</b>		
<b>Other Expenses \$</b>		
<b>TOTAL</b>		