



STATE OF MARYLAND
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

APPLICATION FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE: PROGRAM DESCRIPTION
Healthy Soils Competitive Fund 2024

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

The 2023 Healthy Soils Competitive Fund was a highly successful pilot year. Over 42 applications were received, and 16 grantees were ultimately selected. Projects funded in 2023 included, but were not limited to, whole farm conservation practices, alley cropping, multi-story agroforestry, silvopasture systems, vermiculture, conservation equipment sharing, and biostimulants for nutrient reduction field trials.

Funding for the Healthy Soils Program is currently authorized at \$500,000 annually to ensure that the Healthy Soils Competitive Fund will continue to support producers.

ELIGIBILITY: The following are eligible to apply - Individual farmers operating in Maryland, groups of farmers operating in Maryland, and individuals or organizations conducting research 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. Please note, while example scenarios of the eligible conservation practices are provided, applications are NOT limited to the listed examples.

There are no minimum or maximum acreage requirements for application and enrollment in the program, nor is farm size a criterion for project selection. Funds may be used to support the implementation of conservation practices, to cover staff and administrative time for organizations providing technical support to producers, and to cover research costs. No overhead or indirect funds will be eligible. Any proposed budget item must be clearly explained and justified in the narrative portion of the application. For each awardee, a portion of the funds (not to exceed 40%) will be distributed upfront, with the remainder distributed annually upon verification of progress. The allowable upfront payment will be dependent on the proposed scope of work.

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. The Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) invites applications from interested producers and organizations 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 or their designees to collect soil health assessment data on the 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 (at a time convenient for the applicant) or their designee to verify practice implementation and discuss successes and challenges. Any required documentation of project expenses and/or implementation would be discussed prior to verification.

Any producer wishing to extend their project after year three and receive additional funding must reapply during the annual application period and demonstrate project success to date or potential for future success.

DEADLINE: Application package requirements are outlined on page 3. The Healthy Soils Competitive Fund will accept applications from **January 3, 2024, until March 6, 2024**. Grant awards will be announced after the application period closes and before April 30, 2024.

If you have any questions about the application process or the Healthy Soils Competitive Fund, please contact your soil conservation district or Nick Miller, MDA's Healthy Soils Program Specialist, at nicholas.miller2@maryland.gov or 410-980-2350.

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APPLICATION FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE: **REQUIRED APPLICATION MATERIALS**
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- Farm information section is complete (page 6-7)
- Project narrative is attached (page 10)
- Project budget is attached (page 11)
- Farm map showing field(s) where practice implementation is planned is attached
- Prescribed Grazing Plan is in progress (if applying for funds to support prescribed grazing)
- Nutrient Management Plan certification or conditional exemption is attached (page 13)

Application is signed and returned to MDA by March 6, 2024, to nicholas.miller2@maryland.gov or mailed (postmarked by March 6) to:

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

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APPLICATION FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE: **ELIGIBLE CONSERVATION PRACTICES**
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**** NOTE:** Applications are **NOT** limited to the listed examples, but practices should align to 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

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

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

NEW: Soil Carbon Amendment: Application of carbon-based amendments derived from plant materials or treated animal byproducts. *Note: Amendment source, analysis, and application rate must be accounted for in your nutrient management plan. Amendments must be registered with the MD State Chemist as applicable.*



Maryland Department of Agriculture
Healthy Soils Competitive Fund Application
2024

For MDA use
Agreement #:

Section I: Applicant Information

Name of Applicant:	<input type="text"/>		
Name of Farm or Organization:	<input type="text"/>		
Mailing Address:	<input type="text"/>		
City:	<input type="text"/>	State:	<input type="text"/>
		Zipcode:	<input type="text"/>
This project is to be installed on the land in <input type="text"/> County, described as:			
Parcel#	<input type="text"/>		
SDAT can be looked up at https://sdat.dat.maryland.gov/RealProperty/Pages/default.aspx			
Acreages for Practice Implementation:	<input type="text"/>		
Applicants must submit map(s) of the locations described above with application materials.			

Section II: Self Identification

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	<input type="text"/>	No	<input type="text"/>
A Woman?	Yes	<input type="text"/>	No	<input type="text"/>
A veteran?	Yes	<input type="text"/>	No	<input type="text"/>
A new or beginning farmer (<10 yrs of exp)?	Yes	<input type="text"/>	No	<input type="text"/>

Section III: Participant Expectations

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).²

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**
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Submitted applications will be ranked based on the following four 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 a principle is addressed. 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 or will influence other on-farm operations based on management outcomes. **(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., COMET Planner estimates, number of passes with equipment, etc.) are provided and a narrative explanation is provided as part of an application **OR** The operator demonstrates the ability of others to learn from outcomes of the proposed project (e.g., established network, partnership, or outreach opportunity). Project outcomes can be used to advance conservation across the state. **(10 points)**

4. The applicant shows that they have a willingness to work with MDA to share project successes and lessons learned. They have addressed follow up, evaluation, and outreach describing how they intend to use project outcomes. **(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.

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APPLICATION FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE: **TIPS FOR APPLICANTS**
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- 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
- Relate all aspects of your project to the soil health practices defined in the application
- If requesting funds for a specific product or equipment, please provide brand and specification details
- 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 are you working with and/or 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 of carbon sequestration or GHG reduction potential
- Ensure budget accounts for all needs for project establishment and continuation over the three-year period and aligns to the project narrative
- 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) are expected to be leveraged
- Make sure you have a current Nutrient Management Plan at the time of application. If your farm does not meet the requirements to maintain a nutrient management plan, contact your regional nutrient management specialist to request a conditional exemption

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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.” To score highly you must address each question listed below in the project narrative with as much detail as possible. **Complete the project narrative and project budget and submit as an attachment.**

1. What challenges are you facing on your farm that you wish to address by adopting eligible conservation practices?
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)? (For example, you may intend to adopt Integrated Pest Management and begin to monitor fields for pest and disease pressure, selectively manage issues instead of broadly spraying at predetermined times) If appropriate for your project, please 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 outcomes will be? (For example, you may be hoping to increase soil biological activity, organic matter, soil structure, and/or water holding capacity, among other metrics)
5. How will the proposed management sequester carbon and/or reduce greenhouse gas emissions? How are you estimating the benefits (e.g., 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?
7. Are you willing to work with MDA over the course of the grant term to share success stories and lessons learned? How would you be willing to share that information (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, what farms are you working with? Please be sure to identify specific partners and submit maps of implementation areas.

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APPLICATION FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE: **PROJECT BUDGET**
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Please complete the project budget table below and 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.

Please provide the best available information to date on the Project.

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

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



Maryland Department of Agriculture

CURRENT NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT PLAN CERTIFICATION

Participants of MDA financial assistance programs must certify that the agricultural operation associated with the cost share practice(s) is following a *current* Nutrient Management Plan (NMP), to the extent required by COMAR 15.20.07. This form must be submitted to MDA at time of application.

Section I. To be filled out by the Certified Nutrient Management Plan Preparer

Farm Operator Name(s)			
	Farm Name (if applicable)		
	Address		
	Number	Street	
	City	State	ZIP
			County
Plan Preparer Name			
	Certification No.		
		License No. (if applicable)	
Date the NMP was prepared or updated		Total Acres Under Plan	
Period the plan covers:	Begin Date		
		End Date	
I certify that the NMP information for the farm operation listed above is true and correct. I understand that if this information is determined to be false, my certification and/or license may be revoked.			
Signature			
Certified NM Consultant or Certified Farm Operator			Date

Section II. Farm Operator Certification

I certify that: (1) my farm is operating under a current nutrient management plan for the time period indicated above, and (2) my nutrient management plan was developed by the plan preparer named above.			
Signature			
Farm Operator			Date
Print Name			