



FY 2024

**Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture
Pilot Grant Program (“Alliance Pilot”)**

Competitive Grants Request for Proposal (RFP)



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PURPOSE

This grant will provide funds to Soil and Water Conservation Districts for outreach, recruitment, and enrollment of qualifying producers in the Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture (“the Alliance”) Pilot Program, technical assistance to producers, and verification and reporting of conservation practices implemented. The Alliance Pilot Program is a multi-state partnership with Virginia Polytechnic University (Virginia Tech) funded through the USDA Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities Program, which will pay farmers and ranchers who voluntarily implement conservation practices with incentive payments of \$100 per acre or per animal unit, that reflect the benefits they deliver to soil health, water, air and climate. Payments are intended to exceed implementation costs, economic losses during transition to new practices, and future climate policy costs.

The project management staff in Virginia Tech’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences will administer the program in partnership with BWSR and with participation from numerous additional partners. The pilot program will operate in Arkansas, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Virginia. In Minnesota, the goal is to enroll approximately 400 participants for a two-year period.

TIMELINE

Applications must be submitted by 4:30 PM, Monday March 11, 2024. No late submissions or incomplete proposals will be considered for funding.

Grant Cycle	Grant Cycle Dates
Application period open	February 22, 2024 – March 11, 2024
BWSR authorizes grant awards	By March 29, 2024
BWSR sends grant agreements to recipients	April, 2024
Work plan submittal deadline	April 30, 2024
Grant execution deadline	May 15, 2024
Grant expiration date	September 1, 2026

GRANT ELIGIBILITY AND REQUIREMENTS

ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS

The following entities are eligible:

- Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) individually or in partnership, working under a current State approved and locally adopted local water management plan, comprehensive watershed management plan or soil and water conservation district comprehensive plan.

Applicable plans must be current when the Board approves awards to be eligible to receive grant funds as defined under the Board’s Local Water Plan Status and Grant Eligibility Policy.

Applicants must also be in compliance with all applicable federal, State, and local laws, policies, ordinances, rules, and regulations. Applicants who have previously received a grant from BWSR must be in compliance with BWSR requirements for grantee website and eLINK reporting before grant execution and payment.

FUNDING AVAILABLE AND MATCH

We anticipate awarding up to \$375,000 to each of 6 to 10 SWCDs, to be used to administer the pilot program over a three-year period. Funding for incentive payments to producers will be provided directly to those producers by Virginia Tech, at a minimum of \$13 million across all participating districts, using combined federal and state funds, with additional incentives for limited resource producers, as detailed below.

There is no match requirement.

This RFP, the *BWSR Grants Administration Manual* (<https://bwsr.state.mn.us/gam>) and the grant agreement will provide the framework for this program; there is no additional program policy.

ELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES

Administration of the pilot program, including the following activities:

- Conducting outreach to producers, including tailored outreach to limited resource producers;
- Reviewing producer applications for completeness (Virginia Tech will provide application and portal and select applicants);
- Ensuring that contracts between Virginia Tech and producers are executed in a timely manner;
- Providing technical assistance to producers for conservation practice planning and implementation to producers throughout the project;
- Working with BWSR, MASWCD and other program partners to share information about program progress, challenges and accomplishments;
- Hosting and/or participating in field days and events with other districts and program partners;
- Assisting producers in self-certification of completed practices;
- Completing required reporting through the eLINK system;
- Assisting in validating entry of data using the COMET Planner and COMET Farm (for a sub-sample of selected participants). Training in the use of the COMET tools will be provided.
- Spot checking self-certification by producers following implementation of practices.

PRODUCER ACTIVITIES AND PAYMENTS

Participating producers are eligible for incentive payments of \$100 per acre or animal unit per year for voluntary adoption of the climate-smart practices listed below over a two-year period. Producers will apply using an application portal developed by Virginia Tech, and those selected to participate will receive payments directly from Virginia Tech, not from the participating districts. Applicants will be selected based on criteria such as diversity of commodities, operation size, underrepresented producers, and previous adoption of climate-smart practices.

Producer payments will be provided:

- 50% upon enrollment

- 25% after implementation of the selected practice(s), and
- 25% after final reporting is completed.

Limited resource producers as defined by USDA may be eligible for a 100% upfront payment.

ELIGIBLE PRACTICES FOR PRODUCERS

- **Crop practices:** Cover crops (340); no-till (329); reduced till (345); nutrient management, including precision nutrient management (590); conservation crop rotation (328); silvopasture (381); riparian forest buffer (391); riparian herbaceous cover (390), tree/shrub establishment (612); pasture and hay planting (512).
- **Livestock practices:** Comprehensive nutrient and manure management plan and implementation (102); roofs and covers (367)*; waste separation facility (632)*; feed management to reduce enteric emissions (592)*; prescribed grazing (528); nutrient management (590); silvopasture (381).

* Practices eligible for compensation by Virginia Tech under designated funding for animal feeding operations.

Producers will also be compensated for time spent documenting practices through the COMET-Farm platform (10% of producers will be asked to do this).

If a participant is unable to implement the approved practice in the first year due to conditions outside of their control, such as weather, they will be given an extension to install the practice in the second year. If a farmer does not adopt the practice after two years, they must return the funds or apply for an extension due to extenuating circumstances.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

Proposals must include the following information. ANSWERS TO EACH QUESTION must be entered in eLINK and ARE LIMITED TO 2,000 CHARACTERS. (THE CHARACTER LIMIT IN ELINK IS NOT THE SAME AS MICROSOFT WORD)

1. Describe your district's capacity to take on this effort, including but not limited to the following:
 - Are existing staffing levels sufficient to begin work immediately?
 - Experience in entering into contracts with producers for the eligible practices listed above.
 - Experience in using required BWSR reporting systems.
 - Experience in related project activities
2. Describe your district's experiences in working with producers to implement the types of climate-smart practices identified under Eligible Activities. Describe your district's experience working with underserved and limited resource producers, if applicable.
3. What steps are you taking to encourage long-term adoption of these climate-smart practices?
4. What experience do you have providing outreach and education events geared towards the identified climate-smart practices, including events geared toward underserved and limited resource producers?
5. If there are partners, identify each partner's roles and responsibilities.
6. Briefly describe the crop and livestock operations within the project area, including any available information on specialty crops and on historically underserved and limited resource producers, as defined by USDA (see Appendix A). (Refer to the MPCA Environmental Justice mapping tool and other demographic resources as needed.)

7. What is the status of any comprehensive watershed management plans that have been or are being developed for your work area, and/or other relevant resource management plans?

FUNDING PRIORITIES AND RANKING

Priority for funding will be given to proposals that meet the criteria shown below. BWSR reserves the right to select applicants based on geographic distribution and other criteria specific to the Alliance Pilot program.

Scoring Criteria	Maximum Points Possible
<u>Administrative capacity</u> : Demonstration of administrative capacity to manage the project, based on previous record of accomplishments	30
<u>Expertise</u> : Demonstration of expertise to implement the soil health and climate-smart practices listed in this RFP, based on previous record of accomplishments.	25
<u>Prior planning</u> : A state approved and locally adopted local water management plan, comprehensive watershed management plan, or soil and water conservation district (SWCD) comprehensive plan that prioritizes soil health or climate-smart practices.	10
<u>Long Term Adoption</u> : What steps is the applicant taking to support successful adoption and encourage long term adoption of practices by the implementers?	15
<u>Education and Outreach</u> : What specific efforts are proposed to enhance local understanding and knowledge around the practices proposed? What efforts are being made to enhance participation of historically underserved or limited resource producers or expand non-traditional partnerships for these purposes?	20
Total Points Available	100

PAYMENT SCHEDULE

Grant payments will be distributed in three installments to the grantee. The first payment of 50% of the grant amount will be paid after work plan approval and execution of the grant agreement, provided the grant applicant is in compliance with all BWSR website and eLINK reporting requirements for previously awarded BWSR grants. The second payment of 40% of the grant amount will be paid once the grantee has provided BWSR with notification and BWSR has reconciled expenditures of the initial payment. The last 10% will be paid after all final reporting requirements are met, the grantee has provided BWSR with a final financial report, and BWSR has reconciled these expenditures.

APPLYING FOR A GRANT

HOW TO SUBMIT A QUESTION

- Questions regarding grant applications should be directed to your Board Conservationist; a map of work areas and contact information is available at BWSR Work Area Maps.

- Questions regarding the Alliance program should be directed to Suzanne Rhees, Special Projects Coordinator (suzanne.rhees@state.mn.us) or Jennifer Hahn, Federal Conservation Programs Coordinator (jennifer.hahn@state.mn.us)

Responses may be posted on the BWSR website as a “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQ) document and updated periodically throughout the RFP.

HOW TO APPLY USING ELINK

1. Set up your eLINK user account

Proposals need to be submitted via eLINK. Eligible applicants without a current eLINK user account must register for an account at <https://elink.bwsr.state.mn.us> no later than seven days prior to the proposal deadline. For eLINK related questions, first visit the eLINK section of the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page. If your question is not addressed here, please contact elinksupport@state.mn.us.

2. Complete your funding request (proposal).

See the “Completing a Funding Request in eLINK” under the “eLINK Training Videos” tab on the eLINK webpage to view a 11-minute online module describing how to complete a Funding Request within eLINK.

- As part of the proposal, eLINK will require applicants to map the location of the proposed project area.
- Answers to each question is limited to 2,000 characters. Due to differences in how programs are encoded, be aware that the character limit in eLINK is not the same as Microsoft Word or other text editors.
- Proposals may include only one image to be submitted within their eLINK application. Only .jpg, .tiff, or .png file types are allowed.

Applicants must provide answers to the questions listed above as part of their proposal. The questions are related to the ranking criteria categories, which determine how proposals are scored by reviewers. The ranking criteria can be found in the “Funding Priorities and Ranking” section of this RFP.

TECHNICAL EXPERTISE

Grantees must identify the technical assistance provider(s) for the practice or project and their credentials for providing this assistance. The technical assistance provider(s) must have appropriate credentials for practice investigation, design, and construction. Credentials can include conservation partnership Job Approval Authority (JAA), also known as technical approval authority; applicable professional licensure; reputable vendor with applicable expertise and liability coverage; or other applicable credentials, training, and/or experience.

BWSR reserves the right to review the qualifications of all persons providing technical assistance and review the technical project design if a recognized standard is not available. See also the [Technical Quality Assurance](#) section of the Grants Administration Manual.

PERMITTING

The applicant is responsible for obtaining and complying with all permits necessary to execute their projects. If applicable, successful applicants will be required to provide sufficient documentation prior to work plan approval that the project expects to receive or has received all necessary federal, state and local permits and

meets all water quality rules, including those that apply to the utilization of an existing water body as a water quality treatment device. *Applicants are strongly encouraged to contact the appropriate regulatory agencies early in the grant application development process to ensure potential projects can meet all applicable regulatory requirements.*

APPLICATION GUIDELINES

Prior to final selection, the Board may engage applicants to resolve questions or to discuss modifications to the project or funding request.

Proposals with components that are incomplete or missing will not be considered for funding.

APPLICATION REVIEW

BWSR staff will initially review all applications for eligibility. Eligible applications will be reviewed and ranked based on the criteria in this RFP, by an interagency review panel.

The Executive Director is authorized to make final award decisions.

GENERAL INFORMATION

GRANTS AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

Under Minnesota Statute 13.599, responses to an RFP are nonpublic until the application deadline is reached. At that time, the name and address of the grantee, and the amount requested becomes public. All other data is nonpublic until the negotiation of the grant agreement with the selected grantee is completed. After the application evaluation process is completed, all data (except trade secret data) becomes public. Data created during the evaluation process is nonpublic until the negotiation of the grant agreement with the selected grantee(s) is completed.

PREVAILING WAGE

It is the responsibility of the grant recipient or contractor to pay prevailing wages on construction projects to which state prevailing wage laws apply (Minn. Stat. 177.42 – 177.44). All laborers and mechanics employed by grant recipients and subcontractors funded in whole or in part with state funds included in this RFP shall be paid wages at rates not less than those prevailing on projects of a character similar in the locality. Additional information on prevailing wage requirements is available on the Department of Labor and Industry (DOLI) website <https://www.dli.mn.gov/business/employment-practices/prevailing-wage-information>. Questions about the application of prevailing wage rates should be directed to DOLI at 651-284-5091.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

State Grant Policy 08-01, (see <https://mn.gov/admin/government/grants/policies-statutes-forms/>) Conflict of Interest for State Grant-Making, also applies to BWSR grantees. Grantees' conflicts of interest are generally considered organizational conflicts of interest. Organizational conflicts of interest occur when:

1. A grantee is unable or potentially unable to render impartial assistance or advice due to competing duties or loyalties,

2. A grantee’s objectivity in carrying out the grant is or might be otherwise impaired due to competing duties or loyalties, or
3. A grantee or potential grantee has an unfair competitive advantage through being furnished unauthorized proprietary information or source selection information that is not available to all competitors.

APPENDIX A: DEFINITIONS

Limited resource producers	One who has a household income at or below the national poverty level (for a family of 4) or less than 50% of the county median household income in each of the previous two years.*
Socially disadvantaged producers	A member of a group whose members have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of that group without regard to their individual qualities. These groups consist of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American Indians or Alaskan Natives • Asians • Blacks or African Americans • Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders • Hispanics.
Small-scale producers	USDA definition (gross cash farm income under \$250,000)
Beginning producers	One who is new to farming or ranching or has operated a farm or ranch for less than 10 consecutive years.
Women producers	Women who are principal operators of farms (having primary responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the farm)
Veteran producers	A person who served in the United States Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, or Coast Guard, including the reserve components thereof, and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable, and who has 1) not previously operated a farm or ranch or; 2) has operated a farm or ranch for not more than 10 consecutive years.
Specialty crop producers	Specialty crops are defined by USDA as “Fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture, and nursery crops (including floriculture).” Eligible plants must be cultivated or managed and used by people for food, medicinal purposes, and/or aesthetic gratification to be considered specialty crops. ¹

¹ Section 101 of the Specialty Crops Competitiveness Act of 2004 (7 U.S.C. 1621 note), amended under [section 10010 of the Agricultural Act of 2014, Public Law 113-79](#) (the Farm Bill)