

Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund 2009 Phase 2 Request for Proposals (RFP)

LCCMR ID: 037-B1

Project Title: Certified Crop Advisors as Environmental Assessors

Total Project Budget: \$ \$299,960

Proposed Project Time Period for the Funding Requested: July 2009 - June 2012

Other Non-State Funds: \$ \$86,250.00

Priority: B1. Reduce Soil Erosion

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City / Township:

Metro, SW, SE

Summary: An On-Farm EZ Resource Assessment developed by the Minnesota Project will be used by certified crop advisors to conduct environmental assessments, evaluate BMPs improvements and to determine water quality payments.

Main Proposal: 0908-2-024-proposal-09 LCCMR MNPrjct FnlPrpsl 9-30-08.doc

Project Budget: 0908-2-024-budget-LCCMR RFP_2009_PrjctBdgt3 9-30-08.xls

Qualifications: 0908-2-024-qualifications-09 LCCMR MngrOrg Dscrptn 9-30-08 Fnl.doc

Map:

Letter of Resolution: 0908-2-024-resolution-09 LCCMR Board Resolution.pdf

Main Proposal

Certified Crop Advisors as Environmental Assessors

I. PROJECT STATEMENT

Farmers are increasingly relying on certified crop advisors (CCAs) for soil fertility assessment and crop production advice. In Minnesota there are more than 800 CCAs and 13,000 nationwide. In March 2008, several CCAs and the American Society of Agronomy (CCA certification organization) determined that an On-Farm EZ Assessment developed by the Minnesota Project enabled CCAs to become effective and efficient environmental assessors. These assessments use USDA-approved methods to assess soil erosion, nutrient loading, and water quality impacts of farm operations. These USDA methods are based upon indices and other calculations.

The USDA and other conservation agencies have not had the capacity to conduct on-farm assessments for several years and it is critical to the health of Minnesota's resources to have a skilled workforce available for this activity that is also knowledgeable about agriculture.

Much like the advancement of adopting precision agricultural practices where farmers target crop nutrient needs, these on-farm assessments will allow farmers and governmental staff to target practices where they are most effective, a so-called precision conservation process.

An aim of this project will be to demonstrate how CCAs can use this On-Farm EZ Assessment to target conservation practices to improve water quality by reducing soil erosion and nutrient loading from fields, and off-field areas such as ravines.

The second aim will be to use the On-Farm EZ Assessment as a means to measure the improvements in the soil and water resources. The On-Farm EZ Assessment's dual purpose of assessing the farm conservation needs and then assessing the BMPs impact on the farm's soil and water resources will determine the non-point source pollution improvements.

The final goal for this project will be to evaluate a "Payment for Water Quality Outcomes" process. Instead of paying farmers for the cost of practices, funds will be used to monetarily value the improvements. The goal of the outcome-based process is to foster innovation and efficiency in soil and water improvements. A first-ever Conservation Commerce Conference will convene the agriculture, environment, conservation and government stakeholders to discuss the potential of how a joint government and marketplace process can pay farmers for improvements in water quality using methods and findings of this project.

II. DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT RESULTS

Result 1: Identifying BMP Needs using Precision Conservation

Budget: \$ 80,782

Certified Crop Advisors will use the On-Farm EZ Assessment to identify conservation needs on 35 farms that represent the various cropping systems located within Minnesota's four agro-ecoregions. The 35 assessments conducted by CCAs will be used by public and private conservation professionals to assist farmers in accessing and targeting governmental programs using this assessment and precision conservation method.

Deliverable

Completion Date

1. 35 On-Farm EZ Assessments and Conservation Plans

July 2010

Result 2: Precision Conservation Process Evaluation

Budget: \$ 76,396

Because this is the first precision conservation effort coordinated with a whole farm assessment process, all the stakeholders involved in this system as well as natural resource organization will be surveyed to evaluate the process. All the BMPs installed on the farms will also be evaluated on how they are improving the water quality by using the On-Farm EZ Assessment process. A portion of the BMPs will also be monitored on four farms using water quality monitoring devices in cooperation with the Minnesota Ag Water Resources Coalition Discovery Farms project.

Deliverable	Completion Date
1. BMP Evaluations on 35 Farms	May 2012
2. Evaluation of Precision Conservation Process	June 2012

Result 3: Paying for Water and Soil Quality Outcomes

Budget: \$ 142,782

Water quality improvements made by farmers will be valued using the On-Farm EZ Assessment process and will be compensated based upon the stakeholders input and consensus. An initial sum of \$100,000 will be used to demonstrate a water quality marketplace. This money will be used as seed money to pay for water quality in one watershed and applied at the minimum to 10,000 acres. The first-ever Conservation Commerce Conference will be held to convene stakeholders on a marketplace strategy.

Deliverable	Completion Date
1. Water Quality Payment Marketplace Demonstration	July 2012
2. Conservation Commerce Conference	July 2012

III. PROJECT STRATEGY AND TIMELINE

A. Project Partners

The On-Farm EZ Assessment and Precision Conservation process will be reviewed by the U of M Water Resource Center, MPCA, MDA, BWSR, NRCS, the Great Lakes Regional Water Quality Team, the Livestock Environmental Assurance Consortium (LEAC), the MN Ag Water Resource Coalition (MAWRC), and the American Society of Agronomy (ASA).

Watershed organizations included in the effort include the Cannon River Watershed and the Minnesota River Board. Developing water and soil quality payments and demonstrating 'Conservation Commerce' will involve all partners listed above.

B. Project Impact

This project has to the potential to recruit Minnesota's 800 certified crop advisors as the workforce to assess on-farm soil and water resources and apply Precision Conservation. The On-Farm EZ Resource Assessment is also applicable at a national level for federal farm policy, TMDLs, and establishing industry standards for the emerging bio-economy.

C. Time 3 years

D. Long-Term Strategy

This proposal is part of a longer-term strategy that also includes the potential to use this type of process as a federal farm bill green payment, industry environmental quality programs, and assisting farmers in meeting regulatory program goals.

Project Budget

IV. TOTAL PROJECT REQUEST BUDGET

BUDGET ITEM <i>(See list of Eligible & Non-Eligible Costs, p. 17)</i>	AMOUNT	% FTE
Personnel: <i>Who is getting paid to do what and what is the % of full-time employment for each position? List out by position.</i>	\$ -	%
Tim Gieseke, AG Director of The Minnesota Project will serve as Project Coordinator for the three year period: Organize relationships, meetings and communications on the use of the On-Farm EZ Resource Assessment as it relates to Precision Conservation; Identify 35 farms for assessment process, act as technical assistance liaison between CCAs and local government agencies; Oversee and review BMP evaluations and water quality tests, develop and conduct stakeholder surveys; develop water quality payment proposal and process, provide oversight, organize Conservation Commerce Conference and write final report.	\$ 79,430	45%
Contracts: <i>With whom and for what? List out by item.</i>	\$ -	
Resource Assessments: Certified Crop Advisors will conduct 35 On-Farm EZ Resource Assessments that will include soil and water quality assessment tools	\$ 28,000	
Precision Conservation Plans : The Certified Crop Advisors that conducted the 35 resource assessment will develop 35 conservation plans.	\$ 17,500	
Water & Soil Quality BMP Evaluations for 35 farms: Certified Crop Advisors will evaluate the water and soil quality improvements using the assessment tools on the farms that implemented BMPs.	\$ 7,000	
In-Field Water Quality Sampling: The Minnesota Ag Water Resources Coalition will conduct water quality sampling on two sites for two years (2011 - 2012).	\$ 50,000	
Water & Soil Quality Improvement Payments: Farmers in the Cannon River Watershed and/or the Minnesota River Basin will be paid for the value of water quality improvements rather than the cost of implementing practices on a minimum of 10,000 acres.	\$ 100,000	
Other: <i>List by item and explain.</i>	\$ -	
Travel: Estimated 6000 miles traveled for each of the three years.	\$ 10,530	
Conservation Commerce Conference: Meeting room, travel and expenses	\$ 7,500	
TOTAL PROJECT BUDGET REQUEST TO LCCMR	\$ 299,960	

V. OTHER FUNDS

SOURCE OF FUNDS	AMOUNT	Status
Other Non-State \$ Being Leveraged During Project Period: The Conservation Commerce Conference will be planned for 150 participants and a registration fee of \$75.	\$ 11,250	Pending
McKnight Foundation funding for instrument development, partnership and policy development	\$ 75,000	Pending
In-kind Services During Project Period: Farmers time investment 10 hours / assessment @ 35 farms @ \$30/hr	\$ 10,500	
Past Spending: USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Professional Development Proposal provided a grant to the Minnesota Project toward conservation planning and development of a resource assessment	\$ 53,950	
Past Spending: McKnight Foundation funded a survey study on the success and needs of the Federal Farm Policy Conservation Security Program to determine what farmers and NRCS staff need for payment for ecological services.	\$ 35,000	
Past Spending: USDA Conservation Innovations Grant to the Minnesota Project piloted a CCA-based conservation planning course that led to the creation of an index-based resource assessment process	\$ 100,000	

Project Manager Qualifications:

Tim Gieseke holds a MS in Environmental Sciences with a focus on agricultural water quality. He managed the Carver SWCD for eight years implementing conservation programs and assisting in installing conservation practices. He has managed a farm operation since 1996 and enrolled in the commodity and conservation titles in the last three farm bills. During his four years with the Minnesota Project, he has focused his policy work on the Conservation Title of the 2002 and 2008 Farm Bills. Tim currently serves as the Agriculture Director for The Minnesota Project.

Organization Description:

The Minnesota Project is a 501c3 nonprofit organization that connects people with policy to nurture collaborations that build strong local economies, vibrant communities, and a healthy environment. Our programs are focused on agricultural practices and policy that promote profitable farms that protect the environment; clean renewable energy and efficient use of energy; and the production and consumption of local and sustainably-produced foods. The Minnesota Project works in ways that emphasize collaboration, community building, and capacity building. For over twenty-five years we have fostered local empowerment, bridged diverse interests, encouraged shared values, and initiated working dialogues that create positive action and policy.

Current Programs:

Agriculture & Water - The Minnesota Project works to ensure that fair farm systems reward family farmers for growing diverse crops while protecting soil and water resources. We do this by bringing together agricultural and environmental interests at the state and national level to create policies that benefit family farms and rural communities, and through the creation and promotion of a natural resource indices system.

Local Food - The Minnesota Project has convened a broad dialogue process to unite efforts to increase the availability of sustainably produced local foods, called The Heartland Food Network. The Heartland Food Network is a network, facilitated by the Minnesota Project that encourages the purchasing of local, sustainable or organic foods.

Clean Energy- We work to greatly expand development of Minnesota's renewable energy resources — wind, biomass, and solar. We also promote policy and practices that result in efficient use of energy. We bring together rural development, agricultural and environmental interests to advance the knowledge, capacity and policies needed for a thriving clean energy industry in the Midwest.

Environmental Issues Addressed

The Minnesota Project works on policy as well as on-the-ground implementation of:

- Soil and water health
- Environmentally sound agricultural conservation practices
- Healthy, local foods produced in a sustainable manner
- Clean, renewable energy
- Efficient use of energy