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Farm Conservation Certifications: Status & Strategies

Leaders in Environmentally Engaged Farming (LEEF)
&
PA Ag Conservation Stewardship (PACS)

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PA Ag Conservation Stewardship (PACS) Background & Purpose

- Inter-departmental, voluntary, state-backed conservation certification
- Recognize and reward farmers who go above and beyond baseline compliance
- Develop novel and high-value reward systems for farm stewardship
- Collect better data and tell farmers' stories





Requirements and Standards

- Current and compliant farm plans
- BMPs implemented as scheduled in plans
- Functional riparian buffer and/or stream-wetland restoration with exclusion (if streams are present on the farm)
- Prescribed grazing on all pastures
- Comprehensive Assessment of Soil Health (CASH) tests - Cornell Lab
- At least 1 supplemental nutrient BMP
- Available to owner/operators across PA
- Recertification every 5 years

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Current Status

- Launched in 2025 at Penn State's Ag Progress Days
- 23 verifiers have been trained and qualified
- Clean Water Academy online training completed w/ DEP
- 4 Farmers have applied and earned final certification
- Practice Keeper application module now fully developed



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Current Benefits and Incentives

- Marketing and Branding Opportunities: state-backed logo
- Regulatory Relief: Bay Inspections and Manure Management Plan Status Reviews
- Improved Ranking: Growing Greener grants (DEP)
- Early Access for REAP: PA state tax credit program (SCC, first come-first serve)
- Public Recognition (optional): Story Map under development
- Farmland Preservation: encouraging county farmland preservation boards to adopt PACS ranking criteria



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Potential Future Benefits from the Commonwealth

- Preferential ranking for PA Farm Bill grants
- Legislative update for farmland preservation ranking criteria
- PDA markets team collaboration: institutional purchasing, PA Preferred Integration, business planning provisions
- Interim financing through farm transitions
- State-Funded Rebates (crop insurance, equipment, etc.)
- Program funding for signage, technical service, exclusive conservation BMP maintenance grants

Leaders in Environmentally Engaged Farming {LEEF}

Prompted by questions at the intersection of ‘Beyond 2025’ and release of CESR | Needed to:

- Build on existing trusted channels
- Welcome all farms as part of the solution
- Consider farm viability
- Be holistic

Chesapeake Bay Legacy Act | Program purpose:

- Reduce nutrients in support of Chesapeake Bay Watershed Restoration
- Mitigate farm emissions and increase carbon sequestration in accordance with Maryland’s Climate Pollution Reduction Plan
- Align environmental goals and initiatives of the department and the state while enhancing farm profitability

Framework

- Portfolio consists of weighted practices across tiers of recognition, taking regional focus into account.
- Living framework that allows prioritization across multiple initiatives with ability to adapt into the future.
- Recertification every 3 years, encouraged to advance through tiers.
- Considers plans across partners in conservation and community spaces, guided by program's advisory committee: WIP, CPRP, SWAP, Whole Watershed, 5MT, and more…

Requirements

- Current Nutrient Management Plan | On Farm Review
  - All animals excluded from streams
  - Soil sampling/testing results
  - Manure sampling/testing results
- Soil Conservation and Water Quality Plan | On Farm Review
  - Adherence to BMP schedule
  - No resource concerns
- Verification of BMPs (tiers)
  - Riparian Forest Buffer, minimum width
  - Prescribed Grazing Plan
  - Animal Waste Management
- Must have community best practice in addition
- CASH Soil Health Test



Conservation Best Management Practices

Assess and value best management practices that provide not only **water quality** benefits but improve **soil health**, are **climate-smart**, and support **wildlife habitat**.

Reviewing new and innovative practices and management methods brought forward from research or industry to receive portfolio points, to better understand their impact.

Consider opportunities to partner across monitoring efforts and performance assessment, to incorporate involvement into tier recognition.

Community Best Practices

Community Best Practices | Agricultural Research
Identifies regional research for the purpose of connecting farmers to those trials and projects.
Water Quality | Ecosystem Services | Food Systems | Operational Efficiency | Economics

Community Best Practices | Agricultural Education & Literacy
Best practices such as on-farm demos, farmer-to-farmer sharing, hosting school field trips, supporting school programming, and mentoring new and beginning farmers.

Community Best Practices | Food Systems
Best practices such as participation in Maryland's Farmers Market Nutrition Program, being GAP certified, selling or donating farm products to food banks, and more

Industry Incentives & Benefits

Financial

- Priority access to grants and lower-interest loans
- Investing back into certified farms
- Amplifying partner programs

Programmatic

- Early or priority access to programs
- Recognized land preservation value
- Expedited permitting channels

Market Recognition

- Institutional purchasing
- Consumer messaging, alongside “Maryland’s Best”
- Prioritization for contracts
- Access to markets

LEEF Incentives & Benefits

Funds awarded in recognition of certification. Platinum ($XXK), Gold ($XXK), Silver ($XK), Certified ($XK)

This award partially defrays the cost of practices undertaken to meet certification and continue advancing through tiers of certification, including:

- operational costs
- industry advisors
- infrastructure and equipment
- educational farm events
- farmer development

What is the LEEF Program working on?

Advisory Committee and Subcommittees

- Advise framework & watershed strategies
- Review portfolios and novel practices

Cohort of Pilot Farms

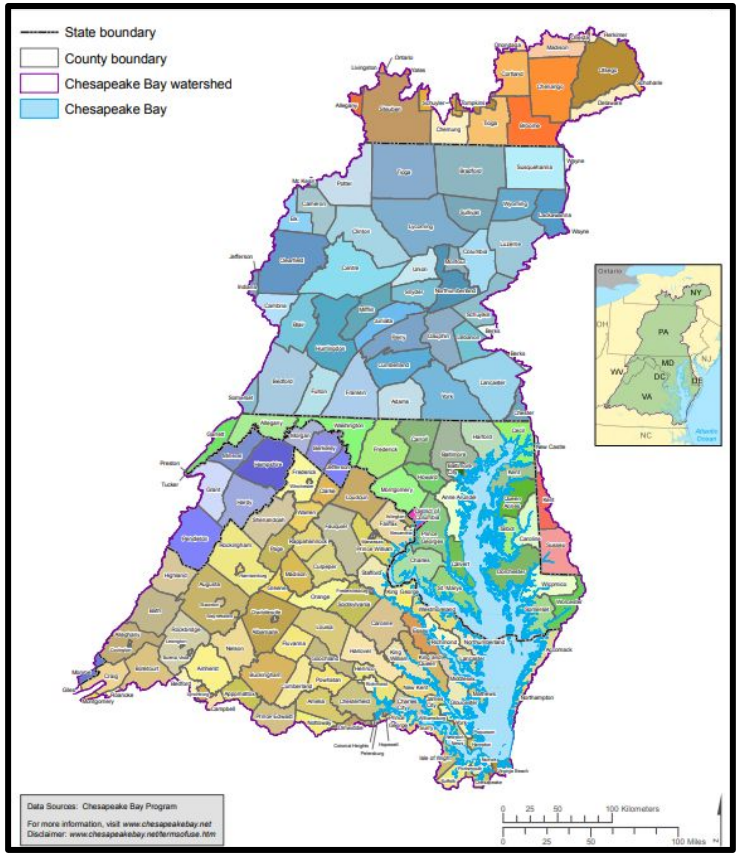
- Showcase operational diversity
- Applications this fall, verification for spring

Future

- Research Review | Research Ready Farms
- Farm Field Days | Field Trip Ready Farms
- Annual Symposium | Peer-to-Peer Sharing
- Collaboration with MDA's Marketing and Agricultural Development
  - Branding
  - Business Development
- Building Industry, Consumer, and Public Recognition



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Common Program Standards

- Compliance with State Ag Planning Regs
  - Nutrient Management
  - Conservation Plan
- QAPP backed verification - CAST reporting
- Soil Health Metrics
- Highlighting priority Ag BMPs - WIP

Shared Efforts

- STAC: Market-Based Approaches in the Agricultural Sector to Support Chesapeake Bay Watershed Restoration
- Added value beyond typical cost share programs - value multiplier
- Sector recognition beyond water quality (co-benefits)
- Engagement of new stakeholders
  - Corporate sustainability programs
  - Direct consumer marketing
  - Financial institutions
  - General public
- Iterative Certification - Adaptive Approach



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Program Collaboration & Strategy in Action

- Interstate reciprocal certification recognition (MOU)
- Encourage common criteria for interstate NGO programming
- Risk management for regional financial institutions
- State led alignment of program standards
- Watershed-wide ag conservation success stories

How can private sector stakeholders engage?

- Direct industry investment (cost of certification, signage, etc.)
- Industry bonus payments for certification
- Price premiums for commodities
- Higher payments for conservation easements by private land trusts
- ESG (environmental/social/governance) incentive programs
- Discounts on non-conservation ag services (crop consulting, etc.)
- Discounts on equipment, inputs, etc.

How can policy makers engage?

- Interstate stakeholder engagement
  - Reciprocal certifications for regional supply chains (possible MOU)
  - Encourage common criteria for NGOs administering programs across state lines
  - Regional funders (farm credit, regional grants/financing, foundations, etc.)
- Recognition of aligned program standards (watershed wide)



Pennsylvania Agriculture Conservation Stewardship (PACS) Certification

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