



PILOT PROGRAM REQUEST FOR APPLICATIONS

1. **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this Request for Applications is to solicit applications for participation in a pilot of the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets' newly developed Vermont Environmental Stewardship Program (VESP).

2. **PROGRAM DESCRIPTION**

VESP is a newly developed program that encourages agricultural producers to achieve environmental excellence through responsible land stewardship. Pursuing VESP certification demonstrates your commitment to regenerative, responsible agricultural practices, and successful completion of VESP certification will result in public recognition of your commitment to environmental stewardship on your farm.

The VESP certification process uses science-based environmental indicators to assess the impact of a farm's management on water quality, soil health, greenhouse gas emissions and carbon sequestration. Participating farms are assessed by technical staff using a combination of field observations and assessment tools to determine if a farm is meeting VESP stewardship thresholds. Farms that meet the program thresholds in each category will be certified by the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets as a Vermont Environmental Steward. Farms that aren't meeting program thresholds will have the option to enter into a conservation planning process to enhance their farm management to become VESP certified. Certification will last 5 years, with an option to recertify, and yearly assessments will be conducted to ensure that farm management is still meeting the program criteria.

A pilot program is needed to inform the final development of the VESP. We are currently looking for 10-12 farms from across the State to participate in the VESP pilot program. Pilot program applicants understand that they are helping us refine the assessment process to inform a full program. Applicants will receive any additional incentives that may become available for the final program that aren't currently available for the pilot.

Certified VESP farmers will receive a high quality on-farm sign recognizing the farm as an environmental steward. Additionally, pilot participants will receive 10 Cornell Soil Health tests on their farm that will help us calibrate assessment tools to real soil health indicators. Participants that undergo conservation planning to achieve certification will be eligible for existing financial assistance for the implementation of conservation practices on their farm, and funding will be prioritized where possible.

Three aspects of this program that sets it apart from other voluntary incentive programs are 1) certification may not require any management changes on behalf of the farmer; 2) soil health is a



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key indicator for program certification; and 3) social recognition is the main incentive for certification.

3. APPLICATION DIRECTIONS

Please fill out all the form below. Incomplete applications will not be considered. When you are finished, please mail finished application to the address shown in section 5 of this RFA . Email and online submissions are accepted. Visit agr.vesp@vermont.gov submit using the online application process. **Applications will be accepted on a rolling basis.**

APPLICANT INFORMATION

1. Applicant Name (*First, Last*):

2. Farm Name:

3. Physical Address of Farm:

4. Mailing Address (*if different than physical address*):

5. Are you the Farm Owner or Operator? (*check all that apply*): Owner Operator

6. Phone:

7. Email:

8a. What is your Primary Farm Operation? Dairy (Cow) Dairy (Goat) Beef Sheep Goat (non-dairy) Crop/Vegetable (No Livestock) Other (please describe):

8b. If you are primarily a dairy farm, which of the following would best describe your farm: Confinement Pasture based

8c. If you are a livestock farm, approximately how many animals do you house or pasture?

9. How many acres of land do you operate? Owned Acres: _____ Rented Acres: _____

10. Are you a certified Organic farm? Yes No

11. Do you participate in Ben and Jerry's Caring Dairy Program? Yes No

12. What Drainage Basin is your farm in? Lake Champlain Drainage Basin Lake Memphremagog Drainage Basin Connecticut River Drainage Basin Hudson River Drainage Basin

13. Have you ever worked with the following organizations? (Check all that apply): USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service University of Vermont Extension Service Vermont Association of Conservation Districts Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation

14. Are you a permitted Medium or Large Farm Operation? Yes/MFO Yes/LFO No/Small Farm

15. Are you aware of the Required Agricultural Practices (RAPs), formerly the Accepted Agricultural Practices (AAPs)? Yes No Don't Know



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16. Are you in compliance with the RAPs ? Yes No N/A

17. Are you in compliance with all State and Federal rules governing wetlands? Yes No
 Don't Know N/A

18. I agree to have my farm verified for compliance prior to acceptance into program: Yes No

19. How did you hear about this program?

20. If selected, are you willing to have your farm profiled as a case study and/or press release ? Yes
No Maybe

21. Why are you interested in this program? What motivates you to become a certified Vermont Environmental Steward? Please explain how your farm management makes you an Environmental Stewardship candidate. Specifically, how do you manage you land with regard to soil health, nutrient management, soil erosion, and pasture management? Also, please indicate whether you would be willing to implement management changes on your farm if it is determined that your farm is not meeting program criteria. *(Use additional paper if more space is needed, attach and send in with application.)*



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4. **SELECTION CRITERIA**

Participants will need to be actively farming and be meeting existing environmental regulations that may apply to their farm. Applications will be screened for these baseline requirements prior to being considered for pilot program selection.

Application selection will be primarily based on an applicant's response to question 21 in the application form provided under section 3 of this RFA. Specifically, farms will be ranked and selected based on their ability to demonstrate (weight of criteria in parenthesis):

- 1) Motivation for seeking Environmental Stewardship recognition as explained in question 21 (30%)
- 2) Demonstration of high level of Stewardship in existing farm management as explained in question 21 (40%)
- 3) Willingness to work with technical staff to improve management if program criteria not initially met as explained in question 21 (20%)
- 4) Willingness for farm to be publically recognized and profiled as indicated in question 20 (10%)

Additionally, we feel it is important for VESP pilot participants to represent a variety of farm types and sizes, and to represent farms from all corners of Vermont. Therefore, geographic location, farm type, and farm size may play a role in our selection process depending on the applications we receive in response to this RFA.

5. **MORE INFORMATION AND CONTACT INFORMATION**

More information on the Vermont Environmental Stewardship Program (VESP) can be found at agr.vesp@vermont.gov

Please send applications to:

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