



Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant Program Request for Proposals

The goal of the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant Program is to improve Wisconsin's soil and water quality by supporting and advancing producer-led conservation solutions that increase on-the-ground practices and farmer participation in local watershed efforts.

- **Important notes:** This is a water quality program. A group's proposal must focus on water quality and watershed health improvement activities. Successful applicants will be asked to report back on any conservation practices, outreach efforts, and demonstration projects funded by grant funds.
- This program supports producer-led efforts. It is imperative that your group is truly led and driven by its participating producers, and that your application clearly describes the leadership role of those producers.
- Grants are reviewed on a competitive basis based upon the ranking criteria outlined in this Request for Proposals, so **please review the criteria very carefully** (pages 6-8). There are separate criteria for groups funded by DATCP for two years or less (Category 1) and groups funded for more than two years (Category 2).
- This is a reimbursement grant. No upfront payments will be provided, and recipients must provide proof of funds spent before reimbursement occurs.
- Direct questions to the Program Manager, Dani Heisler: (608) 640-7270, dani.heisler@wisconsin.gov.

Application Deadline: Tuesday, September 15, 2026 at 5 p.m.

Email submissions in Microsoft Word format to:

DATCPProdLed@Wisconsin.gov

Application Form: [DATCP Home Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grants](#)

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About the Program

The Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grants (PLWPG) program funds nonpoint source pollution abatement activities conducted through the activities of producer-led groups. This program is designed to improve water quality through locally led, farmer-driven conservation solutions. Funded projects must pertain to water quality improvement efforts within a producer-led group's watershed project area. PLWPG funds are administered by the Division of Agricultural Resource Management at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) in accordance with [Wis. Stat. § 93.59](#) and [Wis. Admin. Code ch. ATCP 52](#).

Funding Priorities

Program funding is prioritized towards groups that demonstrate consistent and creative approaches to water quality improvement including:

- Projects that promote sustained conservation practices and soil health systems that increase continuous living cover, which may include planting green, precision conservation management, alternative forages, small grains, perennial agriculture, managed grazing, agroforestry, low disturbance manure applications, in-season cover crop establishment, etc.
- Education efforts to learn about conservation and soil health systems through on-farm demonstrations and/or research with a clear plan to share results with the farming community.
- A comprehensive outreach plan that promotes the environmental, financial, and community benefits of conservation to farmers, agricultural industry professionals, students, non-farming landowners, or other community members.
- Research and demonstration conducted in accordance with the Collaborative Producer-Led Research and Demonstration protocols offered with UW-Madison Division of Extension, linked here: [Producer-Led Research – Crops and Soils](#).
- Projects emphasizing farmer-to-farmer mentorship on conservation practice adoption and successful farmer-led leadership.
- New groups forming in an area with little to no farmer-led conservation activity.
- Projects that demonstrate innovation and growth in farmer-led watershed conservation. Some ways growth may be represented are through increased practice acres, enlarging

geographical footprint, membership increase, building local partnerships, strengthening group diversity, and community integration.

- A balanced approach to allocating grant funding in efforts to maximize the number of producers supported; demonstrated through division of funding across budget categories, moderate rates for practices, maximum allocations per farmer, and process for determining farmer eligibility for incentive funding.

Eligibility Requirements

Per [Wis. Stat. § 93.59\(2\)](#), an applicant must be a producer-led group that meets **all** of the following criteria:

- The producer-led group includes at least five agricultural producers, each of whom operates an eligible farm in one watershed or in adjacent watersheds. The group may include additional agricultural producers who are not required to be operators of eligible farms. The definition of eligible farm can be found on Page 9 of this document.
- The group collaborates and enters a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with at least **one** of the following:
 - A county land conservation department
 - The University of Wisconsin-Division of Extension
 - Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
 - A non-profit conservation organization
- The group assists themselves and other agricultural producers in the watershed to voluntarily conduct nonpoint source water pollution abatement activities.
- The group contributes matching funds at least equal to, but not less than, the amount requested (1:1 match).

Note that maximum annual award per producer-led group is \$40,000 and there is a 25% limit on funding requests for administrative costs. This means that for a \$40,000 project request, up to \$10,000 may be requested to cover administrative costs. Administrative costs are defined on Page 9.

Eligible Projects

Eligible projects include a combination of any of the following nonpoint source pollution abatement activities ([Wis. Admin. Code ch. ATCP 52.04](#)):

- *For new groups only:* Startup costs associated with group formation, including work planning, mission statement development, goal setting, etc.
- Providing incentive payments to producers to implement conservation practices such as cover crops, no-till or reduced tillage systems, buffer strips, manure composting, low-disturbance manure application methods, managed grazing, pollinator habitat, nutrient reduction practices, etc.
- Measuring environmental and financial benefits of conservation practices.
- Performing nutrient management planning, training, and assessments.
- Developing innovative approaches to manure management or conservation equipment-sharing that increases and/or identifies environmental and financial benefits of such practices.
- Hosting education and outreach activities such as conferences, workshops, or field days.
- Increasing farmer participation through one-on-one meetings and peer mentorship.
- Collaborating with partner(s) for on-farm research that identifies environmental and financial benefits of utilizing various conservation practices or strategies.
- Conducting edge-of-field and/or in-stream water quality monitoring.
- Conducting data collection such as well testing, surface water testing, or soil health testing. The group must indicate in their application who they will partner with and the methods used to conduct data collection to ensure they are following an accepted sampling protocol.
- Other activities deemed by the department as consistent with the purpose of this grant program.
 - Activities that deviate from the above listed projects need DATCP approval **before** incurring the cost of that activity.

Eligible and Ineligible Costs

Eligible Costs	Ineligible Costs
Development of work plan and goals, educational/training events, development of incentive program, farm assessments, etc.	Equipment purchases
Incentive payments for conservation practices. Note that a field cannot receive a payment for the SAME practice for longer than three years.	Real estate purchases
Facility rentals, meals, and expenses directly related to hosting field days, workshops, or conferences.	Repayment of loans or mortgages
Staff costs for coordinating project, including expenses for salaries and wages, contract and consulting services, and mileage at allowable state rates. The maximum reimbursable amount for any type of labor expense is <u>\$25/hour</u> . Mileage reimbursement is set by the state rate (\$0.51/mi) .	Rent or contract payments for time periods extending beyond the term of the grant contract
**County land conservation department staff time at a rate of \$25/hour is an eligible cost under this grant as long as the county staff position is NOT already funded by DATCP SWRM grants.	County land conservation department staff time that is already funded by DATCP SWRM grants is not eligible for administrative costs or for use as match
Creation of marketing and outreach brochures, handouts, newsletters, mailings, website development, etc.	Administrative or overhead costs that are not direct costs of the grant project.
Materials and supplies directly associated with the project.	Lobbying activities
Incentive payments for equipment rentals of innovative technologies used/shared by all farmers within the producer-led group. For example, covering costs for renting a no-till drill.	Marketing of private businesses
Rental costs for equipment directly associated with research projects, if pre-approved by DATCP.	Engineered conservation practices including water and sediment control basins, streambank restoration projects, manure storage, wetlands reclamation or creation
Costs associated with monitoring or well testing (capped at \$5,000).	Farm walkovers
Out-of-state travel and/or conference registrations (capped at \$3,000).	Costs associated with identifying depth-to-bedrock on farm fields
Farmer mentorship is reimbursable at a rate of \$25/hour as well as mileage for farmer mentor's travel (capped at \$0.51/mi and \$1,000 per farmer, \$5,000 per group). Includes: farmer member time to mentor other farmers or farmer-led groups on conservation practices, starting and managing a farmer-led group, and other topics as approved by DATCP.	Any alcoholic beverages
Other costs deemed by DATCP as consistent with the purpose of this grant program.	Other costs deemed by DATCP as not consistent with the purpose of this grant program
	Note: Any combined incentive payments to an individual farm exceeding \$5,000; or any other payment, expense, or work that exceeds \$5,000 must receive DATCP preapproval.

Grant Administration Requirements

Funding

The targeted award notification for funding recipients is November 2026. Funding will be available once the contract is signed by both parties and no earlier than January 1, 2027. The grant recipient may submit a formal request to extend any remaining grant funds to the following year. Funds awarded for 2027 expire on December 31, 2028.

Collaborating Entity and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) Requirement

All applicants must have or develop a MOU with one of the required entities listed in the “Eligibility Requirements” section (Page 2 of RFP) and be submitted at the time of application. [An example MOU can be found on the program webpage](#). If DATCP has your current MOU on file, you do not need to submit it again. If requested and approved in advance by DATCP, the MOU may be developed after the submission of the grant proposal but prior to the grant contract development.

Eligibility for Incentive Practices

The PLWPG program does NOT fund payments to farmers on the same acres for the same practice beyond three years. Allowable acres are acres that have not otherwise been funded by the PLWPG program and/or by any other local, state, or federal programs for that same exact practice and/or management methods for more than three years. ***The producer-led group is expected to track this information and be able to make it available to DATCP upon request.***

Fiscal Manager

If the producer-led group **does not** meet the definition of a legal entity (refer to definitions on page 10), a fiscal manager who **does** meet the legal entity definition can be designated to accept and manage the funds on behalf of the producer-led group. Your collaborating entity and fiscal manager (if applicable) **do not** need to be the same entity.

Matching Funds and Source of Match Requirement

Matching funds must be identified in the Budget Request section of the application. Applicants must indicate where the source of match is derived on their application. Matching funds must be at least equal to the total requested grant funds (1:1 match) and directly related to the work of your producer-led group and within the watershed that the work is being completed. *Example: Total requested funds of \$40,000 requires a \$40,000 match.*

Of the required 1:1 match, 50% cash match is required, the remaining amount may be in-kind match. For example: if you request \$20,000, at least \$10,000 of the required \$20,000 match must be cash match. Definitions and examples of in-kind and cash match can be found on page 10.

Please note:

DATCP SWRM funding, including county staffing grants, NMFE grants, and NOPP grants CANNOT be used as match.

The annual report including match documentation is required to accompany final reimbursement requests to prompt payment. Final reimbursement will be withheld if match is not properly documented and/or other grant requirements and reporting are not completed and submitted in a timely manner.

Submitting a Proposal

The application form can be found on the DATCP website: [Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grants](#). Applications must be submitted in Microsoft Word format to DATCPProdLed@wisconsin.gov no later than **5 p.m. on September 15, 2026.**

Application Processing and Evaluation Criteria

A team of DATCP staff and advisors to the Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant Program will review and score submitted proposals on a competitive basis. There are separate criteria for groups funded by DATCP two years or less (**Category 1**) and groups funded for more than two years (**Category 2**) outlined below.

Category 1 (New Groups <2 Years) Evaluation Criteria		100 points possible
1. Completeness of Proposal		Yes or No
Proposal includes all required documentation and fulfills program goals and priorities.		
Proposal meets all program eligibility requirements.		
Project demonstrates a plan to increase on-farm conservation efforts within watershed area.		
Letters of commitment are provided by match contributors.		
A MOU with at least one of the required collaborating entities is provided.		
Collaborating entities listed as non-profits fit the definition for this program.		
<i>**All requirements of Criteria 1 MUST be met to rank application</i>		
2. Need		15
Project area has significant resource concerns; application clearly describes them and how project activities will work to address them.		10
Project would occur in an area of state lacking farmer-led conservation leadership.		5
3. Goals, Objectives, and Work Plan		30
Proposal demonstrates creative and innovative approaches to address water quality issues.		10
Evidence that a workplan is or will be developed and is clearly linked to project goals and desired outcomes.		5
Goals of the project align with the goals and objectives of the group.		5
Viability of project is evident.		5
Project identifies emphasis on one or more of the following areas: conservation systems that promote continuous living cover and/or perennial agriculture, targeted outreach to farmers and other watershed stakeholders, farmer to farmer networking and educational projects and events.		5
4. Anticipated Outcomes		10
Project clearly defines the products (outreach materials, events, etc.), services (education, technical assistance, incentive programs), or other deliverables necessary to meet the project goals.		3
Project focuses on activities that improve water quality and soil health.		4
Adequate metrics are proposed to evaluate project progress and success as they relate to stated goals.		3
5. Organizational Capacity, Farmer Commitment, and Partnerships		25
Farmer leadership and commitment by farmers is evident.		10
Strong project support by participants, partners, industry, and other relevant individuals or organizations.		5
Efforts by the group are complementary to other groups in their region, as well as to local and state programs, rather than duplicative of existing efforts. Project identifies effort to consult with existing groups or conservation farmer leaders as appropriate to effectively manage start-up challenges.		5

Roles of project partners and collaborators are clearly explained and commitment of support for project is evident. <i>Letters of support for new groups are required.</i>	5
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6. Budget	10
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Justification exists for each budget item. Budget items are clear, specific, and meet the program requirements. Budget items and work plan tasks are clearly linked.	6
1:1 match is identified. Time vs. actual costs provided as match are reasonable. Source of match is identified.	4

7. Communications	10
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Project outlines plan to increase farmer participation in conservation efforts.	5
Applicant clearly defines how project information will be shared with the agriculture community and non-farming public.	5

New group applications are weighted more heavily on the development of work plans, evidence of farmer commitment, viability of the project, and communication plans.	Total Points Possible: 100
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Category 2 (Existing Groups >2 Years) Evaluation Criteria	100 points possible
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1. Completeness of Proposal	Yes or No
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Proposal includes all required documentation and fulfills program goals and priorities.
 Proposal meets all program eligibility requirements.
 A MOU with at least one of the required collaborating entities is provided.
 Collaborating entities listed as non-profits fit the definition for this program.
***All requirements of Criteria 2 MUST be met to rank application*

2. Need	15
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Project area has significant resource concerns; application clearly describes them and how project activities will work to address them.	10
Project would occur in an area of the state lacking farmer-led conservation leadership.	5

3. Goals, Objectives, and Work Plan	8
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Work plan exists and is clearly linked to project goals and desired outcomes.	5
Goals of the project align with the goals and objectives of the group.	3

4. Commitment to Improvement and Innovation	15
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Project incentive programming matches group goals and includes one or more of the following: innovative practices, perennial agriculture practices and/or continuous living cover, and conservation systems with multiple layered practices.	3
Project includes effort for continuous learning and education including organizing field days, participating in on-farm demonstrations, or partnering on research.	4
Project includes targeted outreach that promotes the environmental, financial and community benefits of conservation to farmers, industry professionals, non-farming landowners, youth, or other community members.	3

Project outlines plan to increase farmer participation in conservation efforts.	5
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5. Anticipated Outcomes	12
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Project clearly defines the products (outreach materials, events, etc.), services (education, technical assistance, incentive programs), or other deliverables necessary to meet the project work plan.	3
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Project focuses on activities that improve water quality and soil health.	3
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Adequate metrics are provided to evaluate project progress and success as they relate to stated goals.	3
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Group provided adequate and timely information for DATCP tracking project in previous year's funding.	3
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6. Organizational Capacity, Farmer Commitment, and Partnerships	20
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Farmer leadership and commitment by farmers is evident; farmer leaders show examples of mentorship.	10
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Strong project support by participants, partners, industry, and other relevant individuals or organizations. Letters of support are suggested but not required for existing groups.	5
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Efforts by the group are complementary to other groups in their region, as well as local and state programs, rather than duplicative of existing efforts.	5
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7. Budget	10
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Justification exists for each budget item. Budget items are clear, specific, and meet the program requirements. Budget items and work plan tasks are clearly linked.	4
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Group has shown past efforts to self-finance using membership dues, fundraising, sponsorships, or other endeavors to try to build financial sustainability of the group.	3
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1:1 match is identified. Time vs. actual costs provided as match are reasonable. Source of match is identified.	3
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8. Previously Funded Projects: Advancement + Growth	20
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Past performance under previous grant awards and contracts demonstrates that work plan was delivered and objectives were accomplished.	5
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Annual reports included quantitative and qualitative deliverables, demonstrated progress, outcomes and results.	5
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Group continues to grow in multiple of the following ways: continuing to explore new practices, systems, and outreach approaches, demonstrated commitment to refining practices or a system, increase in conservation practices implemented in watershed, increase in farmer participation and membership, refining communication and outreach, commitment to farmer mentorship, and expanding programming options to reach new farmers, building local partnerships, expanding geographical area, and community integration.	5
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Reimbursements, reports, and other grant documents were submitted in a timely manner with required supporting documentation.	5
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Criteria for existing groups is weighted more heavily on plans for continuous improvement and group evolution, commitment to innovation, and farmer leadership.	Total Points Possible: 100
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Receiving a Grant: Expectations

Reporting Requirements

- Grant recipients will be required to file an **annual report**. Details of what must be included in the report will also be outlined in the grant contract between the producer-led group and DATCP.
- At least one farmer and one collaborator from the group must attend the DATCP annual **information-sharing workshop**.
- Funded projects must submit their annual report **no later than February 15, 2028**.
- Grant recipients will be required to provide quantitative and qualitative information detailed in the annual report form including submitting the [DATCP Conservation Tracking Sheet – Basic](#). **It is important for grant recipients to review this sheet before beginning any programming to become aware of information they must track for the duration of their grant.** This information helps DATCP and groups evaluate the potential soil and water quality impacts of their projects. For questions on how to fill out this spreadsheet, contact: Randall.Zogbaum@wisconsin.gov.

Funding Distribution and Reimbursement Information

Awards will be distributed through a reimbursement process upon receipt of the reimbursement request(s) and required receipts and other supporting documentation for the reimbursement request. Reimbursement may only be requested for activities completed after the signing of the grant contract. **The annual report including match documentation is required to accompany final reimbursement requests to prompt payment. Final reimbursement will be withheld if match is not properly documented and/or other grant requirements and reporting are not completed and submitted in a timely manner.** Please note: DATCP does not provide any upfront payments.

A detailed invoice for expenses, including **all** receipts for expenses, purchases made or services provided, will be required at the time reimbursement requests are made. When requesting reimbursement, grant recipients must use the [DATCP reimbursement request form](#) and submit all receipts and invoices associated with their reimbursement request. The reimbursement request form and instructions are located on the right-hand side of the DATCP producer-led webpage. All receipts must be marked with the number of the approved budget category from the contract.

Conservation Compliance

Grant recipients must comply with all federal, state, or local laws, ordinances, regulations, or formal guidelines, including but not limited to those related to soil and water conservation requirements, licensing fees or taxes, in effect during the period of your contract. ***Grant recipients must ensure the five listed farms and any persons identifying as a member who receives a financial benefit from this grant also comply with these provisions.*** Any information received regarding violations or non-compliance may be used when evaluating applications.

Open Records

Applications submitted for funding and all related contracts and reports shall be subject to disclosure under the public records law. If the grant applicant or recipient requests any information be deemed a trade secret, the document should be labeled “trade secret” and the requested status should be noted to DATCP when the document is submitted. DATCP shall notify the grant recipient if a public records request is made for the information claimed to be trade secret by the grant recipient. Such information may be kept confidential by DATCP only as authorized by law (refer to s. 19.36(5), Wis. Stats.).

Other Considerations

All applications submitted in response to this RFP become the property of DATCP. The agency reserves a royalty-free, nonexclusive, and irrevocable license to reproduce, publish, otherwise use, and to authorize others to use materials produced under this grant agreement.

DATCP also reserves the right to:

- Post content from funded applications to the DATCP website.
- Use photos, outreach materials, and publications generated by groups or taken by DATCP staff, project collaborators, or others to promote program successes and activities.
- Share group lead's contact information for related purposes and projects.
- Reject any or all applications received.
- Waive or modify minor irregularities in applications received, after prior notification, and agreement of applicant.
- Amend program specifications after their release, with appropriate written notice to potential applicants.
- Require a good faith effort on the part of the applicant to work with DATCP subsequent to project completion to develop or implement project results in Wisconsin.
- Withhold any payments if contract conditions are not met.

Definitions

"Administrative costs" may include costs for staff time or materials to organize and coordinate meetings, field days, incentive programs, managing data, maintaining records, or other tasks directly associated with supporting the function of a producer-led group and meeting the obligations of the grant.

"Cash match" is the direct project expense the group and group partners provide as your contribution to the project. Cash expenditures for costs related to your project may include:

- Other grant funds (except for DATCP SWRM funds - these cannot be used as match for PLWPG funds) such as those from federal sources, other state funding sources, foundations, non-profit organizations.
- Cash donations from partners or sponsors
- Equipment rentals
- Costs to purchase materials for project costs (e.g. cost of purchasing soil moisture sensors for on-farm demonstrations)
- Travel costs incurred by farmer members for conservation educational events
- A farmer's expenses (not including their time) to implement matching acres of a conservation practice (for example, a farmer receives incentive funding for 20 acres of cover crops and plants 40 acres total)
- Farmer mentorship includes a farmer's travel expenses to mentor farmers or producer-led watershed groups and a consulting fee rate of \$25/hour to mentor other farmers on conservation practices or other producer-led groups on starting and managing a producer-led watershed group.

An ***"eligible farm"*** means a farm that produced at least \$6,000 in gross farm revenues during the taxable year or a total of at least \$18,000 in gross farm revenues during the preceding three years.

"In-kind match" are materials and services, space and utilities, equipment and technical assistance provided by your group or donated by a project partner specifically for this project. In-kind match sources may include:

- Time spent at a rate of \$25/hour including staff time and farmer time put towards services such as outreach, research, administrative, technical, and education services

- *In-kind contributions for services or resources from organizations other than the producer-led group and collaborator can be included, e.g. donated facility rentals for events, materials or equipment for projects, etc.*
- *A farmer's costs for implementing a practice may also be used as in-kind match if the group has already met cash match requirements from other sources.*

A **“legal entity”** includes a corporation, partnership, company, or association registered by the Department of Financial Institutions or a nonprofit organization with tax-exempt status under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

A **“non-profit conservation organization”** means a nonstock corporation, charitable trust, or other entity whose purposes include the acquisition of property for conservation or agricultural preservation purposes, that is described in section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code, that is exempt from federal income tax under section 501 (a) of the Internal Revenue Code, and that is a qualified organization under section 170 (h) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

A **“producer-led group”** is a group of at least five farmers that operate eligible farms³ who work collaboratively on nonpoint source abatement activities within a watershed.

The size of a **watershed** is not defined for the purposes of this grant program, however, every farmer in your group must reside within the same watershed project area. For example, the watershed you choose to work in could be a HUC 10 (from 40,000 to 250,000 acres) or a HUC 12 (10,000 to 40,000 acres) or a series of adjoining watersheds. A map is provided on our program webpage to help you determine what watershed your group resides in.

Application Tips

As you develop your grant application, consider the following tips and suggestions.

- Be clear and concise but tell your story. Members of the review panel may not work with you directly and will need background information on your project to fully understand the intentions of your work.
- Review the ranking criteria listed on pages 5-7 of this document to ensure you are addressing all applicable criteria in your application.
- Develop a strong work plan with achievable goals that link back to water quality improvement.
- Farmers: include complete descriptions of your operation, why you want to participate, and what your role will be to demonstrate farmer leadership within the group.
- Include a clear and realistic budget and budget explanation so reviewers can understand what each line item will be used for and how it relates to the overall project.
- Have an industry partner review your application before you submit.
- If you are an existing group, be sure to explain specifically how DATCP funds will be used and what was accomplished using previous funds.

Applicant Checklist

A complete application in Microsoft Word format includes:

- ☐ Application form with all required fields completed
- ☐ Budget that includes:
 - Match contributions at least equal to the requested grant amount
 - Staff time requests on separate line items
 - Electronic signatures by lead farmer and fiscal manager (if applicable)
 - Letter(s) of commitment or correspondence provided by all match contributors (required for Category 1 applicants; encouraged for Category 2 applicants)
- ☐ A MOU signed by all necessary parties

