

An Overview of the Best Management Practice (BMP) Program Process

Vermont Agency of Food, Agriculture & Markets (VAAFAM) – Water Quality Division

About: The Best Management Practice (BMP) Program, administered by the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFAM), provides technical and financial assistance to help farmers implement structural, engineered improvements designed to abate agricultural waste discharges in Vermont waters. This document provides a step-by-step overview of the BMP project process. **All steps which require action from the applicant/grantee are underlined.** Please note that every application and project is different. The project process may vary depending on the unique project and involved staff.

Keep in communication with VAAFAM staff. Communication is key to a successful BMP project, be sure to always be in timely communication with VAAFAM staff on all project updates and developments.

- 1) **Submit Your BMP Application:** Fill out and submit a BMP application. Applications are continually accepted, but applications received by April 1st will receive priority for the year's workload. Applications received after the April 1st deadline may not be visited until the following year, depending on staff capacity.
- 2) **Follow-up Phone Call from VAAFAM Staff:** After applying, VAAFAM staff will follow up to confirm receipt of the application, provide an overview of the BMP program, and ask you a few questions about your farm and water quality concern. Be sure to let staff know if you are already working with VAAFAM staff or another agency (e.g., NRCS). If our staff believes your project may be BMP-eligible and warrants additional follow-up, you will be assigned a VAAFAM engineer.
- 3) **Follow-up Visit(s) from VAAFAM Staff:** Staff will follow up with you to schedule and conduct a farm visit to look at your water quality concern. The visit will usually be conducted by an engineer and/or a BMP program coordinator. During this visit staff will provide technical assistance and discuss potential projects & opportunities for financial assistance and additional technical assistance. Visit timing will depend on when your application was submitted and on staff capacity. Visits are usually not conducted over winter.
- 4) **VAAFAM Staff Determine Project Eligibility:** VAAFAM Engineering staff will determine your project's eligibility for BMP financial assistance. To be eligible for BMP, a project must meaningfully address an agricultural water quality concern. Staff engineers use their professional training and discretion to make eligibility determinations. You will be informed of their eligibility decision either during the initial field visit, or during a follow-up call or visit. If your potential project is better suited for another program, staff may provide you with a referral.
- 5) **Project Ranking Process:** If your project is determined to be eligible and you are interested in moving forward, your project will go through a competitive ranking process to determine if it will be funded. Eligible EQIP-Assist projects (projects tied to a NRCS-EQIP contract) receive funding priority and will automatically rank out. The ranking process considers: 1) the total water quality impact of the project, 2) the cost-to-benefit ratio of the project, 3) how competitive the project is compared to other potential BMP projects, 4) the amount of available funding, 5) VAAFAM staff capacity, 6) and other factors like project readiness, applicant interest, and other benefits tied to the project. Please be patient with the ranking process.

- 6) **Notification of Ranking Decision:** You will be notified as to whether your project ‘ranked out’ for funding. NRCS-EQIP Assist projects receive priority ranking and funding. If a project does not rank out for funding, it can potentially be waitlisted for funding consideration the following year. You will also be welcome to re-apply. In some cases, VAAFM staff can continue to provide technical assistance even if there will be no financial assistance.
- 7) **Send in Grant Paperwork:** VAAFM requires the following paperwork from you before the grant agreement can be drawn up. A VAAFM staff member will be in contact with you to collect this information:
 - a. A signed VAAFM good standing form,
 - b. A certificate of liability insurance which covers VAAFM & its staff as an additional insured, and
 - c. A completed W-9 form (if you are not already active in the state’s payment system).

EQIP-assist grants additionally require the 1155/1556 forms from your EQIP contract. These will be collected directly from NRCS staff.

- 8) **Design/Planning Process:** If your project ranks out, your assigned engineer will discuss relevant engineering topics such as potential design options, siting options, and any questions or issues around design specifications. This is when they will put together a project design, if needed. The design & planning process may take considerable time depending on the complexity of the project and the engineer’s workload. You will be provided with project design & specifications once they are complete.
- 9) **Find Contractor(s) for Project & Get Quotes:** Once you receive project design & specifications from your engineer, you will need to connect with contractors able to install the project and get quotes/cost estimates for the work. We recommend connecting with multiple contractors so that you can find the most competitive cost estimates & quotes for the work. It’s best to connect with potential contractors as early as possible, as contractors can be very busy. Please note that, as a state agency, VAAFM cannot recommend any specific private contractors. Do NOT begin construction until after a grant agreement has been signed and sent to you.
- 10) **Send in Cost Estimates & Quotes:** After you have cost estimates for the project, you need to send the estimates to your VAAFM engineer for review. These cost estimates will help determine the grant total for your project. Your engineer may want to set up a meeting with you and your contractor to discuss the project and cost estimates.
- 11) **Create Project Financing Plan:** Carefully review the cost estimates and anticipated cost share amounts for the project. Be sure to review BMP cost share policy and discuss any questions you have with BMP staff. Create a plan for how you will pay for the project. Your financing plan should include how you will pay for your portion of the project (which is, at minimum, 10% of project costs) and how you will temporarily cover project costs until the time of VAAFM payment. If you are unable to front project costs, consider looking into bridge loan options or discuss creating a payment plan with your contactor(s).
- 12) **Grant Agreement Prepared:** Once the engineer has reviewed & approved the cost estimates and our staff has received all necessary paperwork, a grant agreement for the project will be drawn up by VAAFM staff.

- 13) **Review & Sign Grant Agreement:** Once the grant agreement is ready, it will be sent to you for review and signature via email. VAAFM uses an online signature software called DocuSign which you will use to review and sign the grant agreement. Paper copies can be sent on request. Please review the grant agreement carefully -- you are welcome to get in contact with VAAFM staff if you have any questions.
- 14) **Grant Agreement Executed:** Once you and the VAAFM representative sign the grant agreement, the grant agreement will be considered executed. You will receive an email with a copy of the fully signed grant agreement once it is completed. The grant agreement will outline the *maximum* potential payment amount that VAAFM will provide.
- 15) **Begin Construction:** After you have received the executed grant agreement, you may begin construction on the project. Do NOT start construction before you have a signed grant agreement. Please notify staff of all construction plans and the anticipated timeline. Depending on the complexity and nature of the project, VAAFM staff may want to be present for construction or parts of construction.
- 16) **Track Receipts & Expenses:** VAAFM determines payment based off the eligible costs listed on the receipts & invoices you provide. Be sure to keep detailed records of all associated expenses and collect all receipts & invoices from involved contractors. Track all your personal labor and expenses towards the project, as these may also be eligible for reimbursement. Ensure that there is sufficient detail on receipts & invoices to speed up VAAFM's review process.

Please note: While the cost of *renting* a tool is a reimbursement-eligible expense, the cost of *purchasing* a tool is not a reimbursement-eligible expense.

- 17) **Notify Staff when Construction is Complete:** After all project construction is complete, please let program staff know. Your VAAFM engineer will conduct a site visit and certify that the practices were satisfactorily built to standards.
- 18) **Submit Receipts to VAAFM:** To receive your reimbursement check, you must submit all receipts & invoices to VAAFM. Note that VAAFM can provide payment only after construction of a practice or project is completed. VAAFM staff will review receipts to determine the eligibility of all listed items. VAAFM may contact you with questions on receipts.

Please note: From the receipt of completed invoices, issuance of VAAFM payment may take up to 60 days.
- 19) **Payment Processed and Sent:** After receipt review is complete and the VAAFM engineer for the project documents satisfactory project/practice completion, a check will be issued to you. This check will be sent in the mail to the address listed in your provided W9. You will be notified via email when the payment is processed, and the check is on its way. Your payments may be broken up by practice, which can be certified and paid out in smaller portions, based on the discretion of your engineer (this is most common for multi-year EQIP-assist projects).

Please note: Payment amount is based on eligible documented expenses. Reimbursement rates cannot exceed 90% of eligible costs. In the case of an EQIP-assist project, reimbursement rates, additionally, cannot exceed NRCS payment rate. Payment will not exceed the grant maximum listed in your grant agreement.
- 20) **Notification of Grant Agreement Completion:** You will receive an email notifying you when your grant agreement is complete. Notification of grant agreement completion is typically included in the email notifying of your *final* project payment.

21) **Maintain Installed Practice(s):** You are expected to maintain the installed practice(s) in accordance with your grant agreement. You may receive VAAFMM field checks throughout the length of the outlined maintenance agreement. Please reach out to BMP staff if a situation arises where you have any concerns about your ability to maintain the practice(s) in accordance with the agreement.

If you have questions at any point in the application or project process, please reach out to program coordinators or your assigned engineer.

VAAFMM Staff Contact Information

BMP Program Coordinators:

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To learn more about the BMP Program and apply online, visit agriculture.vermont.gov/bmp

