

HOUSE RESEARCH

Bill Summary

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Overview

This bill would establish a new Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program administered by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA). A farmer could choose to participate in the voluntary program. To become certified, a farmer must demonstrate compliance with all applicable environmental rules and statutes and score well on a new assessment tool developed by MDA in consultation with other state agencies. A certified farmer would be exempt from any new water-quality rules issued by state agencies during the certification period.

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- 1 Purpose.** Authorizes MDA, in consultation with named state agencies, to implement the new program. Requires an initial pilot program in selected watersheds until MDA determines the program is ready for expansion.
- 2 Definitions.** Defines key terms.
- 3 Certification instrument.** Requires MDA, in consultation with named state agencies, to develop a certification instrument to determine whether a farmer's water quality and management practices are consistent with state water quality goals and standards.
- 4 License.** Requires a license for each person who performs the required farm certification services. MDA would set the license fee. A licensed certifying agent could not certify a farmer if the certifying agent previously provided technical assistance to the farmer. To be eligible for licensure, a person must be an agricultural conservation professional employed by the state, a local Soil and Water Conservation District, or the United States Department of

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Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service. Alternatively, the person could be a Minnesota certified crop advisor. In addition, a person must pass an exam and meet continuing education requirements.

- 5 **Duties of a certifying agent.** Requires an agent to use the certification instrument to assess whether a farmer is eligible for the program. If the agent concludes the farmer is eligible, the agent must notify MDA and request that MDA issue a certificate to the farmer. If a certifying agent violates any provision of chapter 17 "Department of Agriculture" or an MDA order, the commissioner may issue a warning or suspend or revoke the agent's license. The agent could appeal according to the stated appeals process.
- 6 **Certification procedures.** Requires a farmer who wishes to be certified to conduct an initial assessment, obtain necessary technical assistance, achieve a satisfactory score on the certification instrument, and apply for certification to a certifying agent. If a certified farmer obtains control of additional farmland, the farmer must notify the certifying agent and certify the new farmland within one year. MDA may terminate the farmer's certification for failure to do so. MDA could revoke certification and seek monetary reimbursement from a certified farmer who fails to maintain certification criteria.
- 7 **Certification certainty.** States the benefits and obligations of a participating farmer. A certified farmer would be 1) exempt from new water quality protection rules issued by state agencies for up to 10 years, and 2) considered to be meeting their contribution to any targeted pollution reduction (as in a Total Maximum Daily Load plan issued for a watershed pursuant to the federal Clean Water Act). A certified farmer would be required to 3) continue implementation of practices that maintain certification, and 4) retain all certification records.
- 8 **Audits.** Requires MDA to randomly audit certifying agents and certified farmers.
- 9 **Data.** Classifies all data that identifies farmers or their location as nonpublic or private data on individuals. Requires MDA to make summary data of program outcomes available.
- 10 **Rulemaking.** Authorizes MDA to issue rules to implement the program.
- 11 **Reports.** Requires MDA to report biennially to the legislature.
- 12 **Granting.** Authorizes MDA to use gifts or other state accounts to issue grants, loans, or other financial assistance.