



BUREAU OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND RURAL RESOURCES
AGRICULTURAL RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, CONSERVATION & FORESTRY

Maine Healthy Soils Program Soil Health Implementation Grant

Grant Funding Opportunity Request for Applications (RFA)

RFA#: ARDSHIG26

Released: February 11, 2026

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| RFA Coordinator | All communication regarding the RFA must be made through the RFA Coordinator identified below. Name: Matthew Boucher Title: State Soil Scientist Email: matthew.boucher@maine.gov |
| Information Session | The RFA Coordinator will offer an online information session on 02/18/2026 from 1:00 – 2:00 p.m., Eastern Time Zone. Register here. |
| Written Questions | All written questions must be submitted via this link by 12:00 noon, ET on 03/03/2026 . Please review the Questions and Answers subsection of this RFA for further requirements and instructions. |
| Application Submission Deadline | DACF must receive applications by the Application Submission Deadline: 03/17/2026 , no later than 12:00 noon, ET. Applications must be submitted according to the instructions provided in this RFA, with applications submitted online via this link and Supplemental Documentation emailed to matthew.boucher@maine.gov. |
| Further Resources | Additional information and resources can be found on the program website linked here: Maine Healthy Soils Program website. For timely information about this RFA and other DACF grant opportunities, enroll in the Maine DACF “Agricultural Grants and Loans” email listserv online . |
| Eligible Applicants | Eligible Applicants must: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Own or operate a farm operation located in Maine.• Produce agricultural products with a gross annual value of at least \$2,000 that are intended to be sold commercially in one (1) of the last three (3) years. ALTERNATIVELY, applicants may be a farm operation that produces agricultural products with a gross annual value of at least \$2,000 to support community access to agricultural products.• Have <u>access</u> to at least one (1) acre of farmable land. This land does NOT need to be contiguous, and you do NOT need to have one full acre of production (the land may be rested, forest, generally out of production, etc.). |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enroll in the Maine Healthy Soils Program by signing up for program email updates. If you have yet to enroll in email updates, you may do so via this link. • Commit to working with MHSP staff to complete soil health testing and management planning IF awarded funds UNLESS the farm has a current soil health management plan that includes a soil health test three (3) or fewer years old. • Have NOT received a Soil Health Implementation Grant in any of the last three (3) funding cycles. |
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1. OVERVIEW

A. Background and Purpose

This solicitation and Request for Applications (RFA) identifies the eligibility criteria for the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) Soil Health Implementation Grant (SHIG) and provides the instructions for submitting an application.

SHIG provides funding for farmers to address on-farm soil-health barriers. Barriers may include, but are not limited to, costs for equipment, enhanced cover cropping, increased crop rotation, rotational grazing, soil monitoring equipment, soil testing, labor and training, scaling practice adoption, and resting/rehabilitating poorly performing or fallow fields. Applicants may request up to \$65,000, which may be used over a three-year contract term.

SHIG is a program within the Maine Healthy Soils Program (MHSP), which was created by the 131st Legislative Assembly (12 M.R.S.A., Chapter 7) to promote and expand the use of **healthy soils best practices** on Maine farms.

B. Eligible Applicants

Farmers in Maine are eligible to apply, eligible applicants must:

- Own and/or operate a **farm operation** located in Maine.
- Produce **agricultural products** with a gross annual value of at least \$2,000 that are intended to be sold commercially in one (1) of the last three (3) years. ALTERNATIVELY, applicants may be a **farm operation** that produces **agricultural products** with a gross annual value of at least \$2,000 to support community access to **agricultural products**.
- Have access to at least one (1) acre of farmable land. This land does NOT need to be contiguous, and you do NOT need to have one full acre of production (the land may be rested, forest, generally out of production, etc.).
- Enroll in the Maine Healthy Soils Program by signing up for program email updates. If you have yet to enroll in email updates, you may do so via [this link](#).
- Commit to working with MHSP staff to complete soil health testing and management planning IF you are awarded funds UNLESS you have a current **soil health management plan** that includes a soil health test three (3) or fewer years old.
- You have NOT received a Soil Health Implementation Grant in any of the last three (3) **funding cycles**.

C. Funding Available

- DACF anticipates awarding up to \$500,000 through this RFA process.
- Award ranges will be between \$2,000 and \$65,000 per selected recipient.
- Applicants may not request funding for more than \$65,000.
- DACF may award all or some of the available funding through this RFA process and may make multiple awards.

D. Funding Priorities

- Projects should focus on enhancing soil health practices and/or addressing barriers that hinder soil health practice adoption/management on the farm.
- Applicants who completed soil health testing through the Maine Healthy Soils Program in 2025 will have 5 bonus points added to their application score.

E. Allowable Costs

- Costs associated with adopting or enhancing healthy soils best practices, such as cover cropping, reduced tillage, green mulching, silvopasture, alley cropping, rotational grazing, crop rotation, etc.
- Equipment (new or used) that may be used to improve soil health
- Amendments such as compost, lime, mulch, etc. that have a known positive impact on soil health
- Costs associated with establishing, resting, and/or rehabilitating fields
- Costs associated with scaling practice adoption
- Contracting/services such as drainage or irrigation installation
- Labor and training expenses

F. Unallowable Costs

- Indirect costs and overhead expenses
- Synthetic fertilizers
- Pesticides and herbicides
- Sprayer equipment
- Wages for farm owners/operators
- Beekeeping costs/equipment
- Maple syrup production costs/equipment
- Mushroom production costs/equipment
- Cannabis production costs/equipment
- Importation of soil from external sources
- Loan payments
- Expenses incurred prior to the finalization of a SHIG contract
- Equipment, tools, and supplies that lack a clear soil health focus

G. Grant Spending Timeframe

- **DACF anticipates** the contract term, when recipients may spend grant funds, will be from June 1, 2026 to October 31, 2029.
- The **official** grant contract term will be finalized in the awarded contract(s).
- **No grant purchases or activities are permitted until a contract is finalized.** Expenditures outside of the contract term will not be reimbursed.
- All non-equipment expenses are paid to recipients on a reimbursement basis. Recipients may request an advance to purchase equipment, as agreed upon in the contract.

- Reporting requirements for grant recipients will be outlined in the contract(s).

2. APPLICATION PROCESS

A. Timeline and Key Dates

| | |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| Application Opens, RFA is released | February 11, 2026 |
| Information Sessions (Online) | February 18, 2026, 1:00 p.m. ET |
| Written Questions Deadline | March 3, 2026, 12:00 noon, ET |
| Questions & Answer Summary posted to the program website listed in this RFA | March 10, 2026 |
| Application Submission Deadline | March 17, 2026, by 12:00 noon, ET |
| Conditional Awards Announced (anticipated month, may vary) | May 2026 |

B. Application Checklist

- ✓ Applicants must apply online using the link provided on the program website listed on the cover page of this RFA.
- ✓ Applicants must submit Supplemental Documentation files as needed via email to the RFA Coordinator listed on the cover page of this RFA by the application deadline. These files include:
 - Budget template (REQUIRED)
 - A farm map (REQUIRED)
 - Soil health test results (IF APPLICABLE)
 - Soil health management plan (IF APPLICABLE)
 - Vendor quotes for equipment with a unit price of \$2,000 or more (IF APPLICABLE).

Applicants should use the application workbook to determine which supplemental files they need to submit.

- ✓ Applications must be received by the deadline listed on the cover page of this RFA by 12:00 noon, Eastern Time.

Application Steps

- Download and review the entirety of this RFA (including appendices), the application workbook, the budget template, and any frequently asked questions or examples. All materials needed to apply for this grant are available on the program website listed on the cover page of this RFA.

- Download and complete the application workbook found on the program website. You will NOT submit the workbook with your application package. The workbook is a tool to guide you through the application questions.
- Attend the live Information Session and/or submit any written questions to best understand/clarify the application process, funding priorities, eligibility, allowable costs, etc. **It is the responsibility of all applicants and other interested parties to examine the entire RFA and seek clarification in writing or at the information session if they have specific questions.**
- Fill out the budget template found on the program website according to the instructions in the template and the application workbook.
 - Include funds for soil health testing if you have not completed testing in the last 3 years (see below for details).
 - Save the completed budget template as a .xlsx file with a file name: **ARDSHIG26 Budget – [YOUR FARM’s NAME]**
- Download a map of the farmed area and annotate the map according to the instructions on page 18-19 of the application workbook and/or the online application. There is an example of an annotated map on the program website.
 - Save the completed map as a .pdf file with a file name: **ARDSHIG26 Map – [YOUR FARM’s NAME]**
 - Other file types will not be accepted.
- Use the application workbook/online application to determine if you need to submit soil health test results and/or a soil health management plan.
 - Ensure test results include all required measurements to qualify as a soil health test.
 - Water holding capacity
 - Aggregate stability
 - Percent organic matter
 - Soil protein
 - Soil respiration
 - Active carbon
 - Soil pH
 - Extractable P
 - Extractable K
 - Extractable Mg, Fe, Mn, and Zn
 - Soil texture
 - If you do not have soil health test results that are 3 or fewer years old, you MUST include funds for soil health testing in your budget.

- Ensure the management plan is completed in collaboration with an ag service provider. A Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) does NOT qualify as a soil health management plan for the purposes of this grant.
- Ensure both documents are saved as .pdf files. Soil health test results must have the file name: **ARDSHIG26 Results - [YOUR FARM's NAME]** and soil health management plans must have the file name: **ARDSHIG26 Plan - [YOUR FARM's NAME]**.
- Other file types will not be accepted.

□ Use the application workbook/online application to determine if you need to submit any vendor quotes. You must submit quotes for EACH piece of equipment with a unit price of \$2,000 or more. NOTE: in your budget template, you MUST provide a plain-language description of the equipment in your line-item details.

- Ensure vendor quotes include all required information:
 - The date the quote was generated
 - The vendor name
 - The equipment name
 - An itemized breakdown of all expenses included (shipping, handling, delivery, implements, attachments, etc.)
 - Total price of each item
- Ensure all vendor quotes are saved as .pdf files. Vendor quotes must have the file name: **ARDSHIG26 Quote [#] - [YOUR FARM's NAME]**. Please include all vendor quotes in a SINGLE email.
- Other file types will not be accepted.

□ Fill out and submit the online application form, which can be accessed via the link on the cover page of this RFA.

□ Email all Supplemental Documentation files to matthew.boucher@maine.gov using the subject line: **ARDSHIG26 Supplemental Files - [YOUR FARM's NAME]**. In the body of the email, list the attached files. If files are too big to fit in a single email, send multiple emails and list the attached files in the body of each email.

C. Information Session

- DACF staff will offer online question-and-answer office hours on the date listed in this RFA. Register for the Information Session using the link on the cover page of this RFA.
- In the information session, the RFA coordinator will review the grant RFA, application requirements, and take questions from participants.

- The RFA Coordinator will post a written summary of the session's questions and answers on the program website by the date stated on the RFA cover page.
- All interested parties are responsible for going to the program website listed in this RFA to obtain a copy of the Question & Answer Summary.
- Only those answers issued in writing on the program website will be considered binding.

D. Questions and Answers

Questions

- All questions must be submitted to the RFA coordinator through the online form, the link for which is available on the cover page of this RFA.
- Questions may not be submitted via phone call, text, or other means not listed in this RFA.
- The deadline for written questions is **Tuesday, March 3, 2026, by 12:00 PM ET**.
- Only questions pertaining to application technology will be answered after the written question deadline (e.g. technical challenges with the application form and/or supplemental file submission). Please plan to allow at least two business days for a response. Technology and/or submission troubleshooting questions must be directed to the RFA coordinator via email.

Answers

- The RFA Coordinator will post a written summary of the questions submitted, along with the corresponding answers, on the program website stated on the cover page.
- Responses will be written and publicly posted at least seven (7) calendar days before the application deadline.
- All interested parties are responsible for going to the program website listed in this RFA to obtain a copy of the Question & Answer Summary.
- Only those answers issued in writing on the program website will be considered binding.

3. APPLICATION QUESTIONS

Review the **application workbook** available on the program website for complete instructions on how to answer and format each question. You are HIGHLY encouraged to save a copy of the application workbook, type your answers directly into the workbook, and then copy/paste your answers into the online form.

A. Applicant Information

1. What is your farm business name?
2. What is your legal first name?
3. What is your legal last name?
4. What is the street address of your farm?
5. What is the town your farm is located in?
6. What is the ZIP code of the town your farm is located in?
7. What is the county that the farm is located in?
8. Is your mailing address different from your farm's physical address? (YES or NO)
9. What is your mailing street address? (Enter NA if not different from farm address)
10. What is the town your mailing address is located in? (Enter NA if not different from farm address)
11. What is the ZIP code of the town your mailing address is located in? (Enter NA if not different from farm address)
12. What is the county of your mailing address? (Enter NA if not different from farm address)
13. What is your phone number? (xxx-xxx-xxxx)
14. What is your email address?

B. Farm Information

1. What is the primary use of your farmland? (Select the best option from the dropdown menu, see application workbook for details)
2. How many acres are devoted to the PRIMARY farming use? (Enter a number)
3. What is the secondary use of your farmland? (Select the best option from the dropdown menu, see application workbook for details)
4. How many acres are devoted to the SECONDARY farming use? (Enter a number)
5. What is the TERTIARY use of your farmland? (Select the best option from the dropdown menu, see application workbook for details)
6. How many acres are devoted to the TERTIARY farming use? (Enter a number)
7. How many combined acres are devoted to your primary, secondary, and tertiary uses? (Enter a number)
8. Estimate the combined gross income generated from the agricultural products produced from your primary, secondary, and tertiary farmland uses.

9. How many years have you been farming on the farmland described above? (Enter a number)

C. Identification of Soil Health Constraints

1. From the dropdown menu, please select the PRIMARY soil health constraint that you aim to address through this grant. (Select the best option from the dropdown menu, see application workbook for details)
2. From the dropdown menu, please select the SECONDARY soil health constraint that you aim to address through this grant. (Select the best option from the dropdown menu, see application workbook for details)
3. Describe the extent of the primary and secondary soil health constraints on your farm. (100 – 250 words)
4. To the best of your knowledge, describe how these soil health constraints developed on your farm. (100 – 250 words)
5. Describe how you make management decisions on your farm and the extent to which you account for soil health in those management decisions (100 – 250 words)
6. Describe the extent of any external TECHNICAL support you have received in identifying and addressing soil health constraints on your farm. (100 – 250 words)

D. Implementation Plan

1. Select a maximum of TWO soil health practices from this list that you aim to improve using grant funds. (Select the best options from the dropdown menu, see application workbook for details)
2. Describe how you CURRENTLY employ the selected soil health practices on your farm. (100 – 250 words)
3. Describe the key barriers you face to improving the selected soil health practices on your farm. (100 – 250 words)
4. Summarize how you intend to use these grant funds and how they will change the way you implement the two practices you selected. (100 – 250 words)
5. Explain how your use of funds will DIRECTLY address the soil health constraints, soil health practices, and key barriers described above. (100 – 250 words)
6. Describe your farming experience and training in detail. (100 – 250 words)
7. How will you build on your proposed use of funds to continuously improve your soil health after grant funds are exhausted? (100 – 250 words)
8. Inevitably, changes to your farm management can create new farm management challenges. What new challenges do you think may develop on your farm? How might you address those challenges? (100 – 250 words)
9. How will you leverage these funds to improve soil health knowledge in your farming community? (100 – 250 words)

E. Budget

1. Line-item details: Follow the instructions in the application workbook/budget template instructions to enter all requested information for each line item.
2. Narrative details: Justify the need for each line item and state how it will help the farm improve soil health
3. Cost information: Enter the cost of each line item based on the number of units being purchased. Enter cost information for each year you intend to purchase the line item

F. Bonus

1. Did you complete soil health testing with the Maine Healthy Soils Program in field season 2025? (YES or NO)

4. REQUIRED SUPPLEMENTAL DOCUMENTATION

All Supplemental Documentation labeled ‘Required’ below must be submitted as a supplemental file. For any Supplemental Documentation marked ‘If applicable’ below, use the application workbook to determine if and how you must submit that documentation.

1. Budget Template (Required)
2. Farm Map (Required)
3. Soil Health Test Results (If applicable)
4. Soil Health Management Plan (If applicable)
5. Vendor Quotes (If applicable)

All Supplemental Documentation must be emailed to matthew.boucher@maine.gov using the subject line **ARDSHIG26 Supplemental Files - [YOUR FARM's NAME]**. Please refer to Section 2B: Application Checklist of this RFA for supplemental file formatting and submission requirements.

5. SCORING RUBRIC

A. Overview

An application can score a maximum of 80 points.

| Section | Total Points | How is it scored? |
|---|---------------------|--|
| Completeness | 5 | There are 4 completeness criteria. The application is reviewed for each of these criteria. You can lose up to 5 points if the application does not meet the stated requirements. |
| Identification of soil health constraints | 20 | There are 4 questions in this section, each worth a maximum of 5 points. |

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| Implementation plan | 40 | There are 8 questions in this section, each worth a maximum of 5 points. |
| Budget | 10 | The budget template provided is scored on 5 criteria, each worth 2 points. |
| Bonus | 5 | If you completed soil health testing with the Maine Healthy Soils Program in 2025, you will receive 5 additional points on your application. |
| TOTAL | 80 | |

B. Completeness (5 points)

You can only lose a maximum of 5 points for completeness, even if your completeness tally exceeds 5.

| Criteria | Scoring Guidance | Rubric |
|--------------------|---|---|
| Word counts | Every question includes instructions for your answer. The word count minimums and maximums are articulated for each question. If the question instructions do not contain a word count range, then that question has no word count. | Minus 1 point for EACH answer that does not meet word count requirements |
| Supplemental files | You should submit ONLY the supplemental files that are required. Those requirements are articulated at the end of this workbook. | Minus 1 point for EACH extraneous file submitted (this includes soil tests that do not meet the required specifications, comprehensive nutrient management plans, quotes for equipment with a unit price of less than \$5,000, and other documents not explicitly requested). |
| Farm map | The farm map requirements are described in the SUPPLEMENTAL FILES section of this workbook. There are 3 different types of annotation required for the map. | Minus 1 point for EACH missing annotation. |
| General | Application and supplemental materials should be submitted on time and each question should be answered. Supplemental materials were emailed to matthew.boucher@maine.gov with the appropriate subject line. Questions should be answered in | Minus 1 point for improper submission. Minus 1 point EACH for every question not answered in the format outlined in the question instructions. |

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| | the format articulated in the question instructions. | Minus 1 point for EACH email that does not contain the appropriate subject line. |
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C. Identification of soil health constraints (20 points)

There are four (4) questions in this section that are scored. Each question is worth 5 points. The rubric articulates 5-point, 3-point, and 1-point answers. Reviewers may assign 0, 2, or 4 points if the answer meets the requirements for some but not all of the next highest score.

| Question | Scoring Guidance | Points Available |
|---|---|------------------|
| Describe the extent of the primary and secondary soil health constraints on your farm. | <p>5 points – The applicant provides specific details that demonstrate the scope of the constraint, including an estimated percentage of farmed land affected by the constraint. The applicant describes how they identified the constraints indicated, demonstrating a clear procedure for ruling out other potential causes. The applicant provides multiple examples of how the constraints have negatively affected their ability to farm the land.</p> <p>3 points – The applicant describes the extent of the constraint on the farm, but there is not enough specific information to assess how they diagnosed the issue and/or how significantly the constraint has affected farm operations/productivity.</p> <p>1 point – The answer is too vague to assess the extent of the constraint, its negative impact, and how it affects farming operations. The answer generally lacks specific details. The answer does not address the key information requested in the question instructions.</p> | 5 |
| To the best of your knowledge, describe how these soil health constraints developed on your farm. | <p>5 points – The applicant describes a combination of current farming practices, historical land use, and inherent properties that contributed to the development of a given constraint. Details are specific, with multiple examples of activities that caused the soil health problem. The applicant demonstrates a clear understanding of how current farming practices, historical land use, and inherent properties of the land can combine to cause poor soil health.</p> <p>3 points – the applicant addresses two of the three items requested in the question instructions AND/OR the answer lacks enough detail to understand how a given activity/property contributed to the development of the soil health constraint AND/OR does not address both soil health constraints indicated in the application.</p> | 5 |

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| | 1 point – the answer is too vague to make a proper assessment of the applicant's understanding of how poor soil health can develop on the farm as a result of farming activity, historical land use, and inherent land properties. | |
| Describe how you make management decisions on your farm and the extent to which you account for soil health in those management decisions | <p>5 points – the applicant describes a general process for making decisions on the farm, with at least two specific examples of how they account for soil health when making decisions. The applicant should demonstrate an ability to alter management decisions based on conditions and circumstances that might negatively affect soil health.</p> <p>3 points – the applicant describes a general process for making decisions on the farm, but specific examples are lacking AND/OR specific examples do not make clear how soil health is integrated into farm operations and decision-making.</p> <p>1 point – the applicant states that they always consider soil health in their management decisions without providing enough specific details to demonstrate that amount of consideration.</p> | 5 |
| Describe the extent of any external TECHNICAL support you have received in identifying and addressing soil health constraints on your farm. | <p>5 points – the applicant consistently engages ag service providers for soil health support, demonstrating a clear desire to improve their understanding of soil health. The applicant has received direct, one-on-one technical support to improve soil health on the farm in the last calendar year. The answer describes some of the outcomes resulting from the technical support received.</p> <p>3 points – the applicants engagement with ag service providers does not directly address farm-specific problems (field days, talks, conferences, etc.) AND/OR the applicant has not worked with ag service providers to address soil health issues on the farm in the last calendar year but describes why they have not been able to AND/OR specific details of the engagement and outcomes are lacking (the applicant states that they worked with an ag service provider, but is not clear about the nature of that engagement).</p> <p>1 point – The applicant has not sought direct, on-farm soil health support AND/OR there is not enough detail to properly assess the applicant's engagement with ag service providers.</p> | 5 |

D. Implementation plan (40 points)

There are eight (8) questions in this section that are scored. Each question is worth 5 points. The rubric articulates 5-point, 3-point, and 1-point answers. Reviewers may assign 0, 2, or 4 points if the answer meets the requirements for some but not all of the next highest score.

| Question | Scoring Guidance | Points Available |
|--|---|------------------|
| Describe how you CURRENTLY employ the selected soil health practices on your farm. | <p>5 points – the applicant addresses all elements requested in the question instructions with specific details, outlining how the practice is implemented on the farm using clear examples. The goal for each practice is clear and specific to the constraints identified earlier in the application, with specific examples of how the applicant believes the practice will improve the constraints.</p> <p>3 points – the selected practices do not clearly address the constraints identified earlier in the application AND/OR the applicant has limited experience with a given practice and does not describe attempts to improve knowledge or implementation AND/OR the applicant does not fully address the question as requested in the question instructions.</p> <p>1 point – the applicant addresses zero or one of the elements outlined in the question instructions AND/OR the answer is vague and has too few specific details to assess the extent of the practice use on the farm. The comfort level with a practice is unclear, any stated goals for practice use are not clear or fully described. The practices selected are disconnected from the constraints identified earlier in the application.</p> | 5 |
| Describe the key barriers you face to improving the selected soil health practices on your farm. | <p>5 points – the applicant identifies at least 2 specific barriers and directly connects those barriers to a reduced ability to improve soil health. The applicant uses specific examples to illustrate how the barrier affects their focus on soil health.</p> <p>3 points – the applicant identifies 1 barrier and directly connects that barrier to soil health AND/OR how the identified barrier affects soil health is unclear AND/OR the barriers indirectly reduce the farm's focus on soil health AND/OR the response lacks clear, specific examples of how the barrier affects focus on soil health.</p> | 5 |

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| | 1 point – the barriers identified are vague, lacking specific detail and examples. It is difficult or impossible to understand how the barrier directly impacts on-farm soil health efforts. | |
| Summarize how you intend to use these grant funds and how they will change the way you implement the two practices you selected. | <p>5 points – the applicant provides a clear, generalized overview of how they will use grant funds AND connects the use of funds to anticipated changes in soil health management. The connection between the use of funds and changes to soil health management are direct and clear.</p> <p>3 points – the applicant provides an overview, but the direct impact of the use of funds on changes to soil health management is indirect or unclear. The overview may lack some clarity and cohesion, but it is generally clear how funds will be used.</p> <p>1 point – the answer is vague and does not demonstrate a cohesive project that will clearly change on-farm soil health management.</p> | 5 |
| Explain how your use of funds will DIRECTLY address the soil health constraints, soil health practices, and key barriers described above. | <p>5 points – the applicant describes how the use of funds will change the way they currently manage the farm AND includes a description of how the use of funds will allow them to improve the identified soil health practices AND alleviate the soil health constraint. The applicant clearly connects how the practice to be improved/implemented will alleviate the soil health constraint. The best-case scenario clearly demonstrates a long-term focus on soil health.</p> <p>3 points – the applicant describes how the use of funds will allow them to improve identified soil health practices but does not describe or only vaguely describes how their change in soil management will help alleviate soil health constraints and barriers. Answer lacks detail, and it is difficult to identify a long-term focus on soil health.</p> <p>1 point – the applicant does not provide enough detail to assess how soil management will change on the farm. Connections between soil health practices and soil health constraints are unclear or not made. Does not describe how use of funds will improve soil health practices and alleviate stated constraints/barriers.</p> | 5 |
| Describe your farming | 5 points – the applicant clearly describes experience and training with specific details. The overall answer demonstrates the applicant's preparedness to make the | 5 |

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| <p>experience and training in detail.</p> | <p>previously described changes to the farm operation and/or undertake the project successfully.</p> <p>3 points – the applicant alludes to experience but does not provide enough detail to assess their ability to successfully undertake the project. The applicant does not identify any knowledge areas they would like to improve as they relate to the proposed project.</p> <p>1 point – the applicant states how long they have been farming but does not describe their depth of experience. The answer is too vague to assess their ability to undertake the project successfully. The applicant does not connect their external experiences/honors to improved farm management.</p> | |
| <p>How will you build on your proposed use of funds to continuously improve your soil health after grant funds are exhausted?</p> | <p>5 points – the applicant demonstrates a clear vision for how they will BUILD on their use of grant funds to improve soil health on the farm. The applicant shows a commitment to the long-term planning (3 – 7 years) and discipline required to integrate soil health management more fully into farm operations.</p> <p>3 points – the applicant describes a vision or long-term plan that focuses on soil health, but key details are lacking/the answer is vague. The general vision focuses on how the use of funds itself will improve soil health management in the future, rather than building on the use of funds.</p> <p>1 point – the applicant states that the grant funds will allow them to focus on soil health in the long-term but does not provide details, ideas, or a vision showing what that focus might entail.</p> | <p>5</p> |
| <p>Inevitably, changes to your farm management can create new farm management challenges. What new challenges do you think may develop on your farm? How might you address</p> | <p>5 points – the applicant identifies at least 2 challenges that may arise during project implementation and clearly describes how they would troubleshoot each challenge. The applicant provides specific theoretical examples showing how they may address a challenge.</p> <p>3 points – the applicant identifies 1 challenge, but the description of the challenge and how they would troubleshoot it is vague. The answer does not reflect how changes in soil management can have unforeseen effects.</p> | <p>5</p> |

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| those challenges? | 1 point – the applicant does not clearly articulate any challenges. The answer is vague, making it difficult to assess according to the criteria above. | |
| How will you leverage these funds to improve soil health knowledge in your farming community? | <p>5 points – the applicant proposes 1 way they may leverage project funds to improve soil health knowledge in the agricultural community. The proposal includes clear examples and details that demonstrate a commitment to supporting other farmers. The proposal describes at least 2 desired learning outcomes for the farming community in question.</p> <p>3 points – the applicant proposes 1 or 2 ways they may leverage funds, but the details are vague, making the impact of those efforts unclear. Desired learning outcomes are not articulated as described above.</p> <p>1 point – the applicant does not offer a concrete pathway for leveraging the project to support the broader farming community. The answer is vague and difficult to understand.</p> | 5 |

E. Budget (10 points)

The budget template will be evaluated based on the five criteria below. Each criteria is worth a maximum of 2 points. Three of the criteria require reviewers to assess the individual line items in the budget. Two of the criteria require reviewers to assess the budget as a whole.

| Criteria | Description | Scoring Guidance | Points Available |
|-------------------|--|---|------------------|
| Line-item details | Reviewers will assess the details provided for each line item to ensure that each line item provides the detail requested in the budget template instructions. | <p>2 points – All line-items are clearly described and include model numbers, unit prices, and estimates for tariffs/duties where necessary. If the applicant does not have a soil health test, includes soil health testing as a line-item in the budget.</p> <p>1 point – at least 2 line-items are missing key requested details AND/OR it is difficult to understand what the line item is.</p> <p>0 points – more than 2 line-items are missing requested details AND/OR it is difficult to understand what the line item is.</p> | 2 |

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| | | <p>is. If there is only 1 line-item for the entire budget, the applicant receives 0 points if the line-item details do not meet the 2-point standard above. The applicant does not include soil health testing as a line-item if required.</p> | |
| Narrative | <p>Reviewers will assess the details provided for each line item to ensure that each line item provides the detail requested in the budget template instructions.</p> | <p>2 points – Narratives for each line item include BOTH why the item is needed and how it will help the farm improve soil health.</p> <p>1 point – at least 2 narratives are lacking either a justification or a connection to soil health.</p> <p>0 points – more than 2 narratives are lacking either a justification or a connection to soil health. If there is only 1 line-item for the entire budget, the applicant receives 0 points if the narrative does not meet the 2-point standard above.</p> | 2 |
| Completeness | <p>Reviewers will assess the budget for unallowable costs, general completeness of the template, mathematical accuracy, and presence of vendor quotes where required.</p> | <p>2 points – All identifying information is entered into the spreadsheet. All sections of the budget are filled out as instructed. All required vendor quotes are submitted. No mathematical errors. No hyperlinks included.</p> <p>1 point – there are 1 to 3 incomplete aspects of the budget as described in the 2-point standard.</p> <p>0 points – the budget exceeds the maximum allowable request. The budget includes unallowable costs. Vendor quotes are not included for equipment costing \$5,000 or more. There are 4 or more incomplete aspects of the budget as described in the 2-point standard. Includes ANY hyperlinks.</p> | 2 |
| Soil health focus | <p>Reviewers will assess the budget as a whole and</p> | <p>2 points – The narrative for each line item articulates how the item will help the farm improve soil health.</p> | 2 |

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|-----------|---|--|---|
| | <p>determine if the project costs demonstrate a clear focus on soil health as opposed to improving the general business operations of the farm.</p> | <p>1 point – The narratives for up to 3 line-items do not clearly articulate how the item will help the farm improve soil health. If there are 1 - 3 total line items in the budget, then the applicant receives 1 point if 1 of the line-items lacks a clear connection to soil health.</p> <p>0 points – the narratives for 4 or more line-items do not clearly articulate how the item will help improve soil health. If there is a total of 1 - 4 line-items in the budget, then the applicant receives 0 points if at least 2 line-items lack a clear connection to soil health. If there is only 1 line item in the entire budget, the applicant receives 0 points if that item lacks a clear connection to soil health.</p> | |
| Farm size | <p>Reviewers will assess the budget as a whole to determine if the project costs are appropriate for the size of the farm.</p> | <p>2 points – Equipment and contracted services are appropriate in size and scope for the farmland. Amounts of bulk materials indicate appropriate application rates. Offers a livable wage of at least \$25/hr for any personnel. Travel requests are for training purposes and are within reason.</p> <p>1 point – Any of the above are excessive for the size of the farm but each narrative explains why those amounts are required/if they are in line with the farm's previous usage.</p> <p>0 points – Requests are excessive for the farm size with no clear reason articulated in the narrative.</p> | 2 |

F. Bonus (5 points)

| Question | Scoring Guidance | Points Available |
|---|--|------------------|
| Did you complete soil health testing with the Maine Healthy Soils Program in field season 2025? | <p>5 points – if YES</p> <p>0 points – if NO</p> | 5 |

APPENDIX A: RFA TERMS and DEFINITIONS

Agricultural Products: Plants and animals useful to humans, including but not limited to, forages and sod crops, grains and food crops, dairy products, poultry and poultry products, bees, livestock and livestock products, fiber, fruits, berries, vegetables, flowers, seeds, grasses, Christmas trees, annual and perennial ornamental plants, ornamental trees, and other similar products.

Applicant: An eligible Farm Owner/Operator (see [Eligibility](#)) that is applying for the Soil Health Implementation Grant.

Commissioner: The Commissioner of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

DACF/Department: The Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

Farmland: Any tract or tracts of land used to produce agricultural products for a farm operation that consists of at least one (1) acre and has produced agricultural products with a gross annual value of at least \$2,000 in one (1) of the last three (3) years.

Farm Operation: An entity that uses farmland to produce agricultural products with the intent that they be sold commercially to generate income or otherwise creates access to farmland for historically underserved farmers.

Funding Cycle: The dates during which a funding initiative is active and accepting applications.

FY2026: Fiscal year 2026, beginning July 1st, 2025- June 30, 2026.

Healthy soils best practices: Agricultural and land management practices that:

- A. Enhance the continuing capacity of soils to function as a vital, living biological system, increase soil organic matter, improve soil structure, strengthen water holding and nutrient holding capacity, improve nutrient cycling and result in net long-term greenhouse gas drawdown;
- B. Continuously improve the capacity of soils to host a diversity of beneficial organisms, grow vigorous crops, enhance agricultural resilience, including, but not limited to, the ability of crops and livestock to tolerate and recover from drought, temperature extremes, pests and other stressors, and help regulate the global climate by converting organic residue into stable soil organic matter and retaining nutrients, including, but not limited to, nitrogen and phosphorus;

- C. Continuously improve the health of soils by considering all relevant factors, including, but not limited to, depth of topsoil horizons, water infiltration rate, water holding capacity, organic carbon content, biologically accessible nutrient content, bulk density, biological activity and biological and microbiological diversity; and
- D. Follow the principles of minimizing soil disturbance and external inputs: keeping soil covered, maximizing biodiversity, maximizing the presence of living roots and integrating animals into land management, including grazing animals, birds, beneficial insects and keystone species, such as earthworms.

Indirect costs: Business operating costs that do not directly align with the proposed project such as utilities, rent, and furnishings, are indirect costs.

Maine Healthy Soils Program Soil Health Implementation Grant: A grant program that funding to address on-farm barriers to adopting, improving, and/or maintaining soil health.

Project: A set of interrelated tasks with a cohesive, distinct, specified, and defined goal. It follows a planned, organized approach over a fixed period and within specific limitations (cost, performance/quality, etc.). Additionally, a project uses resources specifically allocated to the project's work and usually involves a team of people. Projects are different from other ongoing operations in an organization because, unlike operations, projects have a limited duration with a definitive beginning and end. A project will also have an overarching goal that the applicant wants to accomplish through a series of individual activities or tasks. This means it has unique goals, deliverables, and characteristics that set it apart from similar initiatives. Thus, it essentially signifies a unique undertaking with its own parameters and objectives.

Review Panel: A panel that shall review grant proposals and make recommendations for funding to the Commissioner. The review panel shall consist of three (3) people appointed by the Commissioner with knowledge of soil health and sustainable agriculture that do not have a conflict of interest with the applicant(s). At least one panel member must be Department staff.

RFA: Request for Applications

Soil amendments: Amendments including but not limited to biochar and compost that are developed from plant and animal residues. Amendments may also include agricultural lime. Soil amendments in this chapter must be used with the intent of improving the physical, biological, and chemical properties of the soil, including but not limited to increasing soil organic matter, soil carbon sequestration, soil aggregate stability, and/or soil organism habitats.

Soil health management plan: A plan that integrates soil health testing results, farmer goals, and farm background/capacity to address, monitor, and improve soil health constraints. The soil health management plan should identify department-determined healthy soils best practices that may be used on the farm, include a tentative implementation schedule, and describe potential barriers plan implementation may face. Alternatives soil health management plans include plans developed collaboratively between a farmer and a technical service provider (e.g. the Natural Resource Conservation Service) external to the Maine Healthy Soils Program, provided that the plan is less than three (3) years old and submitted to the Department for review and approval.

Soil health test: A test that measures the physical, biological, and chemical properties of a soil sample to identify soil health constraints. Measurements included in the soil health test must adhere to the latest research standards and may change as new data are published.

State: State of Maine

APPENDIX B: APPLICANT TIPS

To help ensure that an application is accurately submitted and well prepared for the review committee, please consider the following advice when preparing your application:

- Do not wait until the last minute to prepare or submit the application. Allow ample time for drafting, asking questions, reviewing answers, proofreading, and submission.
- Copy and paste the application questions into a word processing document and draft your application there first so it can be checked for grammar, spelling, syntax, and overall clarity before entering it into the online application.
- Keep application responses clear and concise. Consider if a friend, family member, or application reviewer will be able to understand your application if they are unfamiliar with your business, organization, or industry?
- Do not assume that reviewers will understand the context of your project. Key information that you think is obvious may not be. When in doubt, include key specifics and background information where you think you may be misunderstood. Show off your breadth of knowledge!
- Attend the Information Session and visit the program website frequently to review the question and answer summary documents.
- Submit written questions according to the instructions provided in this RFA.
- Keep in mind that changes cannot be made after the application is submitted.

APPENDIX C: APPLICATION CONDITIONS

The following conditions apply to ALL applicants:

- Applicants must apply online using the found on the cover page of this RFA by 12:00 noon ET by the due date listed on the cover page of this RFA.
- All supplemental files must be emailed to matthew.boucher@maine.gov by 12:00 noon ET by the due date listed on the cover page of this RFA.
- It is recommended that applicants download the application workbook available on the program website, complete the workbook, and then copy/paste answers into the online application. The applicant is responsible for responding to the questions and formatting as provided in the online application. Emailed copies of the application workbook will NOT be accepted as a valid application.
- Vendor quotes may be in the form of a written sales estimate, a catalog, an online vendor pricing sheet, or a binding quote provided by a commercial vendor and MUST include costs for all modifications, attachments, accessories, or auxiliary apparatus necessary to make the equipment usable for its intended purpose.
- Vendor quotes must be provided for all equipment with a unit price equal to or exceeding \$2,000. Vendor quotes may include costs for shipping, handling, delivery, installation, tariffs/duties at the applicant's discretion.
- At this time, it is NOT possible to save your online application and return to it, please use the application workbook to progress through your application before entering your information into the online application.
- Once the application has been submitted, no changes can be made. Proof of timely submission is automatically recorded using an electronic date/time stamp generated when the application is successfully received.
- An applicant may NOT submit more than one application for any reason, including to correct errors, UNLESS they submit a written request to the RFA coordinator via email and receive written approval from the RFA coordinator to do so. The RFA coordinator will assess these requests on a case-by-case basis. Submission of multiple applications by the same applicant without receiving written permission from the RFA coordinator will result in all applications submitted by the applicant being disqualified.

- Additional materials submitted beyond those requested explicitly in this RFA will not be used to evaluate or score an application and may result in the applicant's disqualification.
- Applications must be submitted in accordance with the delivery and formatting requirements outlined in this RFA, the budget template, and the application workbook. Any application submission materials received after the 12:00 noon ET deadline may be rejected.
- DACF assumes no liability for ensuring the accurate/complete/on-time email/online form transmission and receipt of emails and online application forms.
- Applications that do not comply with the instructions specified in this RFA, or that fail to submit all required documents, may result in the proposal being disqualified or receiving a reduced score, at the discretion of the RFA Coordinator and review committee.
- Applicants must submit their best proposal based on the intent of their application and understanding of this RFA. The Department is not permitted to request any additional information to be submitted for application evaluation and scoring.
- The Department may request an interview or written clarification to help clarify an applicant's eligibility, litigation status, financial situation, risk assessment, and/or other information that may be used to determine program/fund eligibility, award, and/or contract specifics.
- The Department will consider the materials provided in the application and internal departmental information regarding previous contract history with the applicant (if applicable).
- The Department reserves the right to consider other reliable references and publicly available information in evaluating the applicant's experience and capabilities.

APPENDIX D: EVALUATION AND SELECTION PROCESS

DACF will conduct three levels of evaluation:

- The **first** level is an administrative review by the RFA coordinator to determine if the application is complete, if only allowable costs and activities are proposed, and if eligibility and other RFA-specific program requirements are met. This review step will result in a pass, fail, or pass with evaluation and scoring qualifications. Ineligible, late, incomplete, unallowable, or incorrectly formatted applications may be disqualified from review committee evaluation. The administrative review will also evaluate adherence to all completeness criteria outlined in the scoring rubric.
- In the **second** level, a review committee of three to four individuals will evaluate your application based on the scoring rubric and question instructions provided in this RFA and the application workbook. Applications will NOT be scored for writing quality, including grammar, spelling, and punctuation, provided that the applicant fully responds to each required application question and the writing quality does not obscure the meaning of the content of the application. Reviewers will use their best judgement of the application materials provided to score each question/criteria according to the provided scoring rubric. Clarification of application materials in any form is not allowed, the reviewers may use ONLY submitted application material to score the application. Members of the review committee will first individually score the applications. Applications receiving a score of 50% of the total points available, or less, from each evaluator score may be determined ineligible to move forward.
- In the **third** level, the review committee convenes and discusses the scores assigned to each question in the application. Through that discussion, reviewers will assign on a consensus score for each scored element of the application, ending with a total score that all reviewers agree on. This consensus score is the final score used in determining awardees.
- The RFA Coordinator will review the scoring and evaluation of all applications and make recommendations to the Commissioner. The RFA coordinator will determine a threshold score, and any application that scores above that threshold will be funded. The threshold will be determined based on the range of scores, the amount of funding available, and the funding requests of all applicants in contention for an award. Final decision-making authority for offering awards rests with the Commissioner, based upon the program requirements and selection criteria found in this RFA and the recommendations of the review committee. All applicants shall be notified in writing following the review committee's decision.

APPENDIX E: GENERAL PROVISIONS

- i. From the time this RFA is issued until award notification is made, all contact with the State regarding this RFA must be made through the RFA Coordinator identified on the cover page of this RFA. No other person/State employee is empowered to make binding statements regarding this RFA. Violation of this provision may lead to disqualification from the application process at the State's discretion.
- ii. To ensure all communications are received, applicants should add the email address of the RFA Coordinator listed in this RFA to their email safe sender's list, address book, or contact list.
- iii. Issuance of the RFA does not commit DACF to issue an award or to pay expenses incurred by an Applicant in the preparation of a response to the RFA. This includes attending personal interviews or other meetings, as applicable.
- iv. All amendments (if any) released regarding this RFA will be posted on the program website stated on the cover page of this RFA. Only those amendments posted on this website are considered binding.
- v. DACF reserves the right to revise, suspend, or terminate this RFA at its sole discretion. In such an event, DACF will inform all applicants as soon as reasonably possible. DACF also reserves the right to extend the deadline for proposal submissions or to solicit additional proposals under this RFA.
- vi. The issuance of a grant solicitation or any grant award decision does not obligate DACF to make any award. Nor does it obligate DACF to make an award in the amount requested. In instances where the amount awarded differs from what was sought by the applicant, DACF will provide a written explanation for the record.
- vii. All applications must adhere to the instructions and format requirements outlined in the RFA and all written supplements and amendments (such as the Summary of Questions and Answers) issued by DACF. Failure to use the instructions specified in this RFA, or failure to respond to all questions and instructions throughout the RFA and application process, including submitting any required supplemental documents, may result in the application being disqualified as non-responsive or receiving a reduced score. DACF and its review committee have sole discretion to determine whether a variance from the RFA specifications will result in either disqualification or a reduction in the scoring of an application. DACF, at its sole discretion, reserves the right to recognize and waive minor informalities and irregularities found in applications received in response to the RFA.

- viii. Additional materials submitted beyond those requested explicitly in this RFA will not be used to evaluate or score an application and may result in the applicant's disqualification.
- ix. DACF assumes no liability for ensuring the accurate/complete/on-time email/online form transmission and receipt of emails and online application forms.
- x. Applications and emails containing links to file-sharing sites or online file repositories will not be accepted as submissions.
- xi. Encrypted attachments received that require opening attachments and logging into a proprietary system will not be accepted as submissions. It is the applicant's responsibility to check with its organization's information technology team to ensure that security settings will not encrypt its application or email submission.
- xii. File size limits are 25 MB per email. Applicants may submit files separately across multiple emails, as necessary, due to file size concerns. All emails and files must be received in accordance with all the instructions listed in the RFA.
- xiii. Grant solicitations shall be publicly posted and available online. DACF shall announce the grant opportunity request for applications (RFA) at least fourteen (14) calendar days before the application submission deadline.
- xiv. Information sessions, if any are held, shall be scheduled at least two weeks before the deadline for submitting a grant application.
- xv. The deadline for questions shall be at least ten (10) calendar days before the application deadline.
- xvi. A written summary of the questions and answers raised during office hours and/or written questions submitted shall be posted on the program website at least seven calendar days before the application submission deadline.
- xvii. In evaluating the eligibility and award determination of applications submitted in response to this RFA, the DACF will consider materials provided in the application, information obtained through interviews/presentations (if any), and internal Departmental information of previous contract history with the Applicant (if any). DACF also reserves the right to consider other reliable references and publicly available information in evaluating the Applicant's experience and capabilities.

- xviii. Applicants must submit their best proposal based on the intent of their application and understanding of this RFA. DACF is not permitted to request any additional information to be submitted for application evaluation and scoring. DACF may request an interview or written clarification to help clarify an applicant's eligibility, litigation status, financial situation, risk assessment, and/or other information that may be used to determine program/fund eligibility, award, and/or contract specifics. DACF will consider the materials provided in the application, any information obtained through interviews/presentations (if applicable), and internal departmental information regarding previous contract history with the applicant (if applicable). DACF also reserves the right to consider other reliable references and publicly available information in evaluating the applicant's experience and capabilities.
- xix. The application must be submitted by, or with the express permission of, a person authorized to legally bind the Applicant into a contract agreement.
- xx. DACF reserves the right to determine the number of awards and modify, partially fund, or increase awards at the Department's discretion, which may include the offering of partial awards at amounts less than requested.
- xxi. DACF may select one or multiple award recipients as a result of this RFA.
- xxii. Grant applicants will be informed in writing of the final grant award decisions.
- xxiii. The RFA and the awarded Applicant's application, including all appendices, attachments, or updated documents requested by DACF, will be the basis for the final contract, as determined by DACF.
- xxiv. Following the announcement of an award decision, all submissions in response to this RFA will be public records, available for public inspection pursuant to the State of Maine Freedom of Access Act (FOAA) (1 M.R.S. § 401 et seq.).
- xxv. All applicable laws, whether or not herein contained, shall be included by this reference. It shall be the Applicant's responsibility to determine the applicability and requirements of any such laws and to abide by them.

APPENDIX F: APPEAL RIGHTS

An aggrieved applicant (Petitioner) may request an appeal hearing on a grant award decision by submitting a request for appeal to the Department Commissioner, in writing, no later than fifteen (15) calendar days from the date of the award decision (date applicant is notified if they have been selected, or not selected, to move forward for award).

The written request for appeal must identify one or more of the appeal indicators listed below and must describe the specific nature of the grievance. The Commissioner shall grant an appeal hearing unless it is determined that:

- i. The petitioner is not an aggrieved person; or
- ii. The written request for appeal was submitted more than fifteen (15) calendar days after notification of award.

The burden of proof within the hearing of appeal lies with the petitioner. The evidence presented must specifically address and be limited to one or more of the following appeal indicators:

- i. Violation of law;
- ii. Irregularities creating fundamental unfairness; or
- iii. Arbitrary or capricious award.

Notice of the appeal proceeding shall follow the requirements of 5 M.R.S. § 9051-A(2) and be provided to those entities as determined applicable by the Commissioner. The notification must include the date and location of the hearing and the name of the Hearing Officer. Appeal proceedings may be held in person, virtually, or in a hybrid format at the discretion of the Hearing Officer. Failure to appear for a scheduled hearing may be grounds for default.