

Certifying that Minnesota's farms and waters can prosper together

7/25/17-

Mighty Axe Hops™ receives certification in the Minnesota Ag. Water Quality Certification Program!

Benton Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) would like to recognize MAH Holdings LLP (Mighty Axe Hops™) for their certification into the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP). Mighty Axe Hops™ is Minnesota's largest hop farm featuring 80 acres of hops, plus a state-of-the-art harvest facility. They began their expansion, and construction of the harvest facility and hop fields last year.

Eric Sannerud and Ben Boo of Mighty Axe Hops™ have expanded from their 3 acre hop yard at their Ham Lake Farm near Anoka, MN, to a 120 acre farm outside of Gilman, MN. This expansion will quadruple the current acreage of hops grown in Minnesota, and will be Minnesota's first state-of-the-art hops harvest & pelleting facility. The MAWQCP is a voluntary certification program that helps farmers and landowners continue protecting Minnesota streams, rivers, and lakes. Through the program, farmers work with local soil and water conservation district personnel to complete a whole-farm assessment which helps identify and mitigate risks to water quality on a field by field basis.

Mighty Axe Hops™ has been planning and working with Benton Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and the US Dept. of Agriculture (USDA) on implementing Best Management Practices (BMPs) within their operation. They set aside almost 9 acres of marginal cropland that is unproductive for growing hops, and are enrolling into the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The marginal cropland buffers both sides of a stream and will be restored to native tallgrass prairie that will protect and enhance water quality while also providing quality wildlife habitat. A 1/2 acre pollinator habitat plot is being planned. Field windbreaks along the west and south sides of the property were planted this past spring to reduce wind erosion. Might Axe Hops™ is also planning on implementing an annual cover crop mix that will be planted in August within the allies of the hop yards. Their goal is to reduce soil erosion and compaction, build soil health, suppress weeds, and provide biological nitrogen fixation. Their nutrient management program follows University of Minnesota rate suggestions when applying plant nutrients, which minimizes the water quality risks of nutrient runoff and leaching.

In cooperation with Soil and Water Conservation Districts across the state, the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program became available statewide in 2015. The voluntary program works with farmers and landowners to highlight any existing best management practices (BMPs) that are already being applied within their fields, and also to identify any water quality risks that may exist. Local SWCD personnel can provide technical assistance to identify and design alternative BMPs that can be applied within the field to mitigate any water quality risks. Some examples of BMPs are cover crops, filter strips, water and sediment control basins, nutrient and manure management plans, irrigation scheduling, etc. Financial assistance is available

to landowners to help offset the cost of implementing any new agricultural BMPs that protect Minnesota's water resources. The farmers need to meet minimum standards in all five water quality concern areas to become certified, making certification for entire farms no small task. After becoming a Water Quality Certified Farm, each farm is deemed to be in compliance with new water quality laws and regulations for 10 years. Certification is also an approved practice farmers can use to comply with the state buffer law, and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency rewards certified farms by placing their applications first in line for feedlot permitting. Certified farmers and landowners can use their certification status to promote their businesses as a water quality friendly farm.

The MAWQCP is administered by the MN Department of Agriculture (MDA) in partnership with the Minnesota Board of Water & Soil Resources (BWSR), the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD). The program is growing in popularity within the agricultural community, with strong supporters such as Land O' Lakes, GNP Company, Third Street Brewhouse & MN Milk Producers Association.

Statewide the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program has a total of 370 certified farms, representing over 215,000 acres. These farms have generated over 640 new agricultural best management practices that are keeping more than 19 million pounds of soil on Minnesota fields annually, and keeping 13.5 million pounds of sediment and over 8,000 pounds of phosphorous from entering lakes, rivers, and streams annually.

Farmers and agricultural landowners interested in seeking MAWQCP certification should contact their local Soil and Water Conservation District. The Benton Soil and Water Conservation District is excited about this program and its potential to help farm owners and operators demonstrate their commitment to clean water and to accelerate the adoption of conservation practices where needed. If you are interested in the program, please contact Casey Gwost, Benton SWCD at 320-968-5300 ext. 3 or feel free to visit our office at 14 2nd Ave West, Foley MN 56329.

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