

APR IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM – FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Please note: these FAQs are not intended to be a substitute for a careful reading of the current year's AIP Request for Responses (RFR).

Q. What is the APR Improvement Program?

A. The APR Improvement Program (AIP) provides business planning, technical assistance and grants to active commercial farms operating on land that has already been protected with Department funds through the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources' Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) Program. The purpose of AIP is to help improve the productivity and profitability of participating farms to enhance the significance of APR farm operations and their contribution to the state's agricultural industry.

Q. How do I apply to the Program?

A. A Request for Responses containing an application to the program may be found on the program web page (<https://www.mass.gov/service-details/apr-improvement-program-aip>) during the open application period, which typically begins in February and closes in April each year. Potential responders should read the Request for Responses thoroughly, as the content including eligibility requirements and due date may vary from year to year, and must submit a completed application by the due date provided. Copies of applications may also be obtained by contacting the APR Improvement Program at (857) 895-0023 or Michael.Parker@mass.gov.

Q. Who is eligible to apply to the Program?

A. Eligible respondents must be owners of farmland that has been protected through funding from the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources' Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) Program for at least 3 years and have been actively farming this APR property for at least the past 3 years. APR farm operators who do not own the property may be Co-Respondents with the landowner. Farms owned by non-profit organizations or municipalities are not eligible for this Program. Specific eligibility requirements may vary from year to year and can be found during open application periods in the Request for Responses for the APR Improvement Program at <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/apr-improvement-program-aip>.

Q. Am I eligible to apply to the Program if I don't own the APR property that I am farming?

A. If you are a farm manager or operator on an APR farm that you do not own, you may co-apply with the landowner. Signatures of both the owner(s) and the operator must be on the application.

Q. Must I farm on a minimum number of acres to apply?

A. Farmers on any size APR farm are eligible to apply, if they meet the other eligibility criteria.

Q. Must my farm earn a minimum gross income to apply?

A. Gross farm income of applicants must be at least \$10,000, as shown on Schedule F or Form 1120, or other relevant tax statements from most recent tax year.

Q. My farm is a non-profit organization. Am I eligible to apply?

A. No. Non-profit farms and organizations are not eligible to apply to AIP.

Q. I'm looking for money to start a new farm business. Am I eligible to apply?

A. Eligible respondents must have been actively farming on an APR property for at least the past 3 years. Start-up farm businesses are not eligible to apply.

Q. Am I eligible to apply if I have already participated and received grant funding from the Farm Viability Enhancement Program (FVEP)?

A. If you have already participated in FVEP once and your covenant has expired, you may apply to AIP. However, your application will receive a lower ranking in the selection process than APR farms that have not received FVEP assistance and grant funding from the Department.

Q. Am I eligible to apply if I have already participated and received grant funding from AIP?

A. No. Prior recipients of AIP grants are not eligible to apply again.

Q. How are applications reviewed and selected?

A. The AIP review committee reviews each eligible application based on a predetermined set of selection criteria that are listed in the current Request for Responses. Those applications that best meet these criteria will receive the highest ratings for selection.

Q. What is the timeline for the Program, and when do participating farms receive the grant funding?

A. The open application period for AIP typically occurs on an annual basis, with the Request for Responses and application available in February and an application submission deadline in April. Applications are reviewed over the summer and farmers are notified in September as to whether or not they have been accepted into the Program. Phase I business planning and technical assistance for participating farms typically begins in October and should be completed by April of the following calendar year. Eligible farms that sign contracts with the Department receive grant funds after completing their project and submitting a final invoice detailing their expenditures, including the farm's matching contribution of at least 25% of the grant amount.

Q. How does the Program work?

A. If selected for Phase I of the program, a team is organized for the participating farm comprised of professionals from various disciplines which may include agriculture, marketing, finance, management, engineering or environmental sciences. Following an assessment of the farm's financial records, management practices, buildings, and natural resources, the team makes recommendations for improving the viability of the farm. The recommendations are prioritized with the farmer and contained in a business plan for the farm. If planned improvements and use(s) of funds meet the objectives of the Program and the farm moves to Phase II, eligible farmers receive a grant from the Department to implement improvements identified in the plan.

Q. If I am selected to participate in AIP, will I be expected to share financial information with MDAR?

A. Yes. All AIP participants are expected to share business operational and financial information with their technical assistance provider(s) and with the AIP Coordinator during Phase I of the program. Any submitted information will remain confidential and will be stored securely.

Q. What if I already have a business plan for my farm?

A. The business planning process may be abbreviated if the farm already has a full business plan that has been completed recently. However, participating farmers must still go through Phase I of the Program in which technical assistance is provided and a business plan update or enterprise plan developed in order to help the farmer identify the best use of funds to improve the viability of the farm while meeting Program objectives.

Respondents selected to the Program who have recently completed a business plan through MDAR's Growing Your Farm Business planning course may waive the Phase I AIP business planning process upon approval of the plan by the AIP Coordinator.

Q. How much money is available to farmers that are selected to participate in the Program?

A. Technical assistance and the development of a business plan are provided at no cost to the farmer. Farmers who participate in completing a plan and then move to Phase II may be eligible for a grant award of either up to \$40,000; up to \$80,000; or up to \$120,000, depending on factors including the number of acres under APR, gross revenues of the farm, and needs identified in the business plan. Participating farmers are required to contribute matching funds to the project of at least 25% of the grant amount.

The provision of grants is dependent upon available funding and award levels are determined at the end of Phase I planning.

Q. What can AIP grant funds be used for?

A. Funds must be used for approved capital improvements that will help maintain or enhance the APR farm property. Eligible uses of funds include resource improvements and maintenance or new or improved agricultural infrastructure on the farm property. Examples of resource improvements and maintenance include, but are not limited to, pasture improvements, fencing, reseeding hay land, establishing perennial crops, improving drainage, and installing irrigation. Examples of agricultural infrastructure include, but are not limited to, farm buildings such as farmstands, livestock housing, processing facilities, and hay or equipment storage barns. Up to 10% of the grant award may be available for approved non-infrastructure uses, such as production or marketing improvements or professional services.

Q. I have a question that's not answered here. Who can help me?

A. Please contact the program coordinator, Michael Parker, at (857) 895-0023 or Michael.Parker@mass.gov.