

4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Manual

Version 3
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1 Introduction

The purpose of the *4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Manual* is to provide an overview of the certification process for the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program (also referred to as the “4R Program”). The intended audience of this document includes participating Nutrient Service Providers who are interested in, or who have already begun, the process of becoming certified as well as other stakeholders in the program, primarily within and/or servicing growers within the Lake Erie watershed and all of Ohio.

The 4R Program was initially created by the 4R Advisory Committee in conjunction with stakeholders across business, government, academic, and non-governmental sectors, with the goal of long-term improvement of Lake Erie’s water quality. The 4R Program was officially launched in March 2014, and includes specifications for best practices for nutrient management for Nutrient Service Providers in the Lake Erie Watershed. Since then, the 4R Program has expanded its scope to additional watersheds, states (as of January 1, 2017 - statewide in Ohio) and provinces, exploring the opportunities of 4R Program expansion. The 4Rs of nutrient stewardship refer to using the Right Source of nutrients at the Right Rate and Right Time in the Right Place (TFI, 2013).

Additional information about the 4R Program is available at <http://4rcertified.org/> and further details are also included in the *4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Standard* (also referred to as the “4R Standard”). **Note:** there will be specific 4R Standards for each geographic region.

2 Terms and Definitions

Audit Report: The report that is prepared by a third-party auditor using the *4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program Report Template* (see also “Progress Report”).

Auditable Evaluation Criteria: Normative statements that are used by auditors to evaluate compliance to a standard.

Certification: Process by which an accredited or authorized person or organization (often a third party) will follow established procedures to assess the conformity against an applicable performance standard. When adequate conformity to the standard has been verified, the accredited or authorized person or organization will attest in writing that a product, process or service conforms to specified requirements.

Certification Administrator: Organization within the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program responsible for overseeing the audit process, including the identification, selection, training and monitoring of 4R Auditors.¹

¹ The Nutrient Stewardship Committee will serve this function in the first year of the program.

Certification Body:² Independent, third-party organization(s) that follow established procedures for assessing conformity against an applicable standard to determine certification status of a product, process, or service (*see also* “Certification”).

Conformity: A finding that the client is meeting a requirement in the *4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Standard*. The term “Conformity” may be used as a synonym for “Comply evaluation” and both terms (i.e., Conformity and Comply) may be abbreviated as “C”.

Corrective Action(s): Steps that are taken to make quality improvements in order to address the causes of an existing non-conformity, and thereby satisfy the requirements of the relevant Standard.

Corrective Action Plan (CAP): Plan prepared by a client Nutrient Service Provider and submitted in response to non-conformities (NCs) raised by the auditor, describing corrective actions taken, plan of action, person(s) responsible, and expected timeframe of completion.

Corrective Action Request (CAR): Formal request for a participating Nutrient Service Provider to draft corrective actions in response to non-conformities (NCs) issued as a result of a 4R audit. The Corrective Action Request (CAR) is typically sent at the time that the audit report is provided to a client.

Grower Customer: Individual growers or farmers who are clients of the Nutrient Service Provider and receive either a nutrient recommendation from the Nutrient Service Provider, and/or have nutrients applied by the Nutrient Service Provider.

Grower Customer List Categories:

- Full service: The NSP provides the either or both of the following services - conducts the soil sampling for and nutrient recommendations OR makes the nutrient recommendations and applies the nutrients.
- Recommendations only: The NSP only provides the nutrient recommendations for the grower customer.
- Application only: The NSP only applies the nutrients for the grower customer.
- Other: The NSP does not provide nutrient recommendations or apply nutrients for the grower customer. The NSP may conduct soil samples or sell nutrients to the grower customer but there is no influence of the NSP as to source, rate, timing or placement of fertilizer.

Non-Conformity: A finding that the client is not meeting a requirement in the *4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Standard*. Non-conformities may be summarized in a Corrective Action Request (CAR) that is provided to the client along with the audit report. Satisfactory responses to non-conformities are required through a corrective action process in order for the client to achieve 4R certification and receive a certificate. The term “Non-Conformity” may be used as a synonym for “Not Comply evaluation” and both terms (i.e., Non-Conformity and Not Comply) may be abbreviated as “NC”.

² Audits in the 4R Program will be conducted in the first year by approved independent auditors. Certification bodies may be involved in the program in future years.

Nutrient Service Provider: General term that refers to entities covered under the scope of the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Standard, including agricultural retailers, agricultural service providers, and certified professionals. For the purposes of the Standard, the relevant functions of Nutrient Service Providers are to provide nutrient recommendations and/or apply nutrients for grower/customers.

Nutrient Stewardship Council: The primary governing body of the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program. The Nutrient Stewardship Council is composed of different stakeholder representatives with interest in water quality and agriculture.

Onsite Audit: Assessing conformance to a standard by means of a visit to the location of the Nutrient Service Provider. Onsite audits typically involve gathering information from interview, observation, and documentation. Onsite audits for the 4R Program rely primarily on review of documents and records, as well as interviews with Nutrient Service Provider staff, but may also include some review of the facilities (e.g., nutrient storage; application equipment) of the Nutrient Service Provider. Onsite audits may be referred to as “field audit” or “office audit”.

Program Administrator: Organization responsible for day-day operation of the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program. Duties of the Program Administrator include serving as the primary point of contact for participating Nutrient Service Providers or Nutrient Service Providers that are interested in undergoing the certification process.

Progress Report: The report that is required from the Nutrient Service Provider in years during which there is no onsite audit (*also see “Audit Report”*).³ A progress report will be evaluated through a remote audit.

Remote Audit: Assessing conformance to a standard through off-site review of documents and records. A remote audit is usually conducted at the location of the auditor, as opposed to the location of the Nutrient Service Provider.

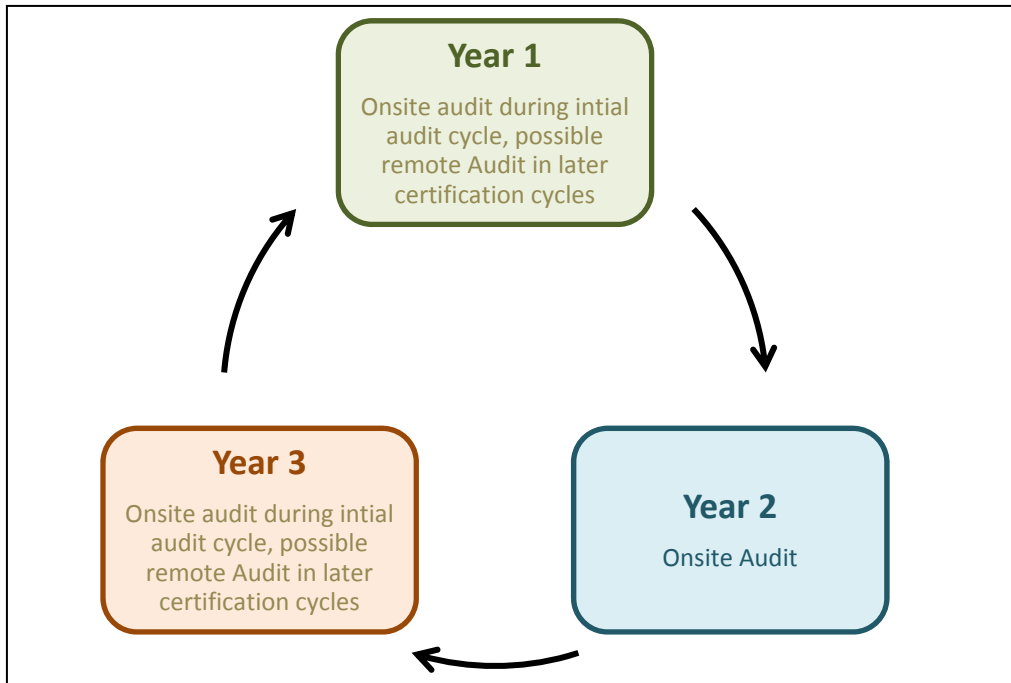
Standard: In general, the normative reference by which a decision to award certification is made. For the purposes of this document, when capitalized, “Standard” refers to the specific guidelines and references established in the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Program.

3 The Certification Process

The 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program occurs on a 3 year certification cycle. The first audit cycle (Years 1 to 3) will always require an onsite audit of the Nutrient Service Provider. If the Nutrient Service Provider performs well according to the results of the onsite audits in Years 1 through 3, it would be eligible to choose a Remote Audit (if audit findings are in *good performance* and in compliance with the Standard requirements) in Year Four. From that point, every other year could be performed as a Remote Audit.

³ The Program Administrator will provide information on the format of this document prior to Year 3.

An overview of the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program cycle is shown below in FIGURE 1.



The 4R Standard includes a total of 45 requirements, 28 applicable in Year 1, 11 that become applicable in Year 2, and 6 that become applicable in Year 3, as indicated in **Table 1** below. **Note that all 45 requirements are applicable for every year following Year 3.** Therefore, while Year 4 would represent the first year in the certification cycle, all 45 requirements would be applicable.

Audit Year	# Requirements	# Requirements (Cumulative)
1	28	28
2	11	39
3	6	45

Table 1. Summary of Number of 4R Standard Requirements by Audit Year.

As noted above, Nutrient Service Providers who receive “good performance” status during the initial audit cycle (Years 1 through 3) are eligible to undergo a remote audit during Year 4 in lieu of an onsite audit. For the purposes of the program, “good performance” is defined as follows:

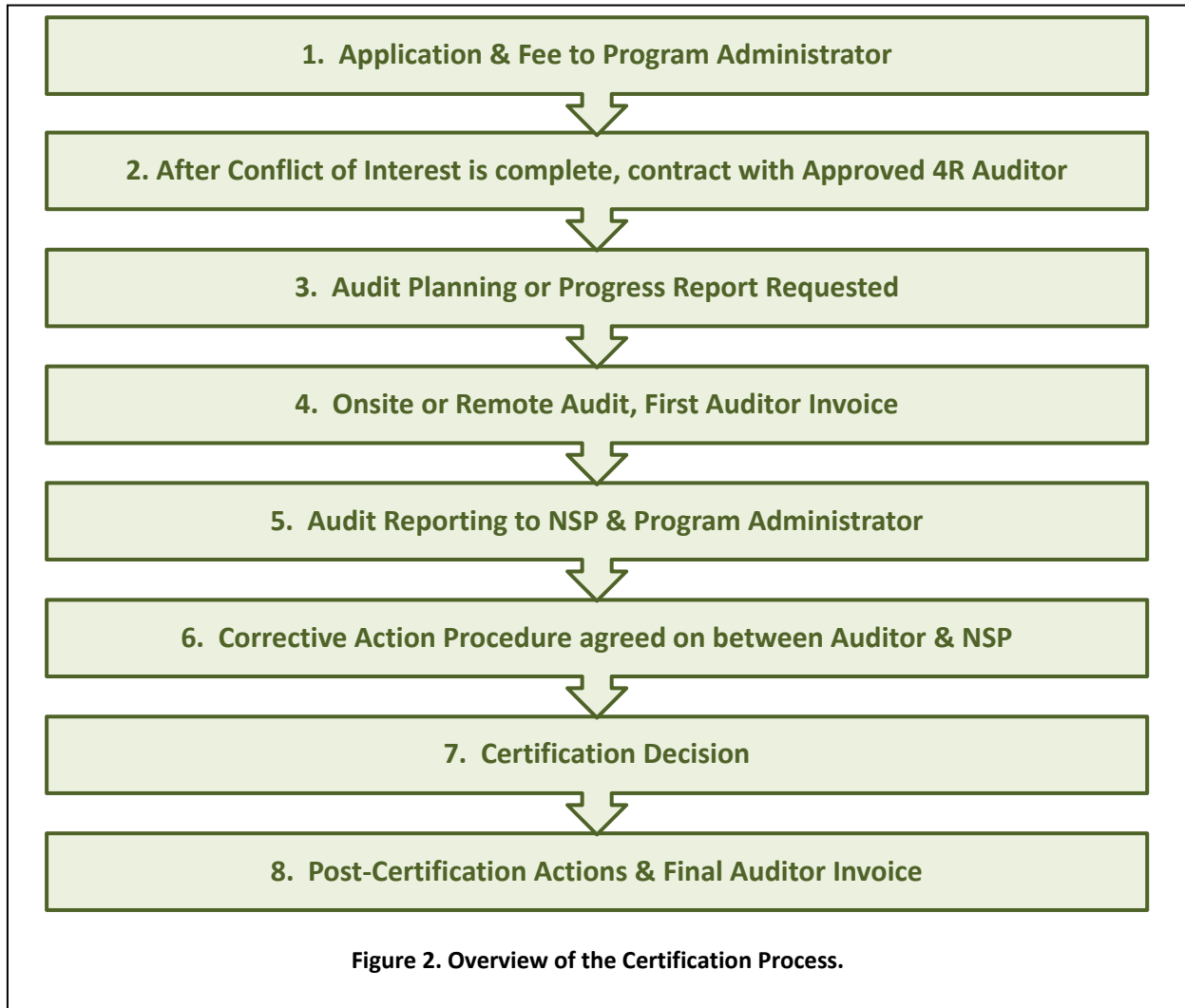
- A. The Nutrient Service Provider receives a Comply evaluation for all fundamental requirements as indicated in **Table 2** shown on the next page; *AND*,
- B. The Nutrient Service Provider has no more than 4 Not Comply evaluations in total during the audit, and, following the audit, satisfactorily addresses the Not Comply evaluations through a Corrective Action Process (*further information about the Corrective Action Process is provided below*).
- C.

Section	Requirement #	Requirement Yr	Topic
Initial Training and Ongoing Education	1.1.1	Year 1	Initial 4R Training
Nutrient Recommendations and Application	3.1.1	Year 1	Maintenance of Records
	3.3.1	Year 1	Soil Tests ⁴
	3.5.2	Year 1	Nutrient Levels are According to Recognized Recommendations (e.g., Vitosh et al., 2012)
	3.5.6	Year 1	Requirements for Broadcast Applications without Incorporation
	3.5.7	Year 3	Broadcast Applications Prior to Rainfall
	3.5.8	Year 1	Application to Frozen Ground
	3.5.9	Year 1	Application Rate

Table 2. Fundamental Requirements in the 4R Program.

During each year of the certification cycle, including years that there may be a remote audit, the audit process will follow the steps outlined in **Figure 2** on the next page. Each step is explained further below following the illustration (Figure 2). *See next page.*

⁴ As acres change often for grower customers, if the field is new to the NSP, there must be a plan in place to get the soil sampling current, less than four years old.



1. Application & Fee to Program Administrator

The first step in the 4R Program is for the client to review the *4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Standard* and to complete a *4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program Application*. Completed application forms and **\$600 annual program registration fee** should be sent to the 4R Program Administrator (*see contact details on the last page of this document*), who will confirm receipt and request any additional information as necessary. An application form may only be required in the first year of the certification program. In subsequent years, the client may be sent a reminder by the 4R Program Administrator regarding the need to schedule an onsite or remote audit in order to maintain certification status in the program.

2. After Conflict of Interest is complete, contract with Approved 4R Auditor

Following successful application, the Nutrient Service Provider will be directed to offer available dates for the audit to occur. After the Program Administrator completes the conflict of interest review, the 4R Program Administrator will send a standard quote to the Nutrient Service Provider. An auditor is selected for the Nutrient Service Provider based on conflict of interest review, schedule, and proximity. The 4R Program Administrator will then provide the application of the Nutrient Service Provider to the auditor. The 4R Program Administrator will coordinate the scheduling of the audit date with the Nutrient Service Provider and the auditor. Once the audit date is confirmed by the Nutrient Service Provider, contact information of the Nutrient Service Provider's main personnel contact will be provided to the auditor. The auditor will contact the Nutrient Service Provider's main personnel contact to schedule a starting time for the audit. All auditor fees will be invoiced to the 4R Program Administrator. The anticipated auditor fees are outlined in Table 3, below.

Expenses Possibly Incurred with 4R Certification Audit	Fee
Onsite Audit, Report, and Corrective Action Request (if applicable)	\$900
Additional Expenses (i.e., mileage, lodging) to be approved by the Nutrient Service Provider prior to the audit	Not to exceed \$250
Additional time beyond a one-day audit and CAP review	\$75/hr

Table 3. Anticipated Audit Costs

3. Audit Planning or Progress Report Requested

Upon receipt of the signed agreement, the auditor will send the client an audit plan. The audit plan will generally include an agenda of activities, a description of the scope of the audit, auditor contact information, and a list of documentation that should be sent in advance to the auditor, or prepared for review at the time of the audit.

4. Onsite or Remote Audit and First Auditor Invoice

Onsite audits for the 4R certification cycle will consist of a visit to the office of the Nutrient Service Provider. The visit to the Nutrient Service Provider will primarily include a review of documentation necessary to evaluate the Nutrient Service Provider's performance against the *4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Standard*. A list that outlines the Nutrient Service Provider's grower customers and number of acres per grower customer in each of the four categories (i.e., full service, recommendations only, application only, and other) will be used to evaluate the auditable criteria. In addition, the visit to the office of the Nutrient Service Provider will include interviews with staff responsible for nutrient recommendations and application, as well as a general review of nutrient storage and mixing facilities and application equipment. Remote audits will be conducted by the auditor offsite, and will require the auditor to be provided the Progress Report and any necessary documentation in order to adequately assess conformance to the 4R Standard. Upon completion of the onsite or remote audit, the Nutrient Service Provider will receive an invoice directly from the 4R Program Administrator not to exceed \$1,150 unless any additional audit time beyond the one-day audit is considered necessary. These additional fees will be discussed with the Nutrient Service Provider prior to billing.

The following is an example of additional audit time necessary: Nutrient Service Provider will not allow auditor to make copies of documentation to assist in the auditor's compilation of the audit report).

Note that the scope of the 4R Program audit covers a single branch location or operation of a Nutrient Service Provider entity. Separate audits are required for Nutrient Service Providers with separate branch operations .

Auditors will use the *4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program: Audit Checklist* in order to gather information during the audit.

5. Audit Reporting to NSP and Program Administrator

Following the audit, the auditor will prepare an audit report which details the findings of the audit and provides a summary of all non-conformities identified. Audit reports will be completed using the *4R Report Template*. After internal review by the Certification Body,⁵ the report will be finalized and sent to the client along with the Corrective Action Request (CAR) if any non-conformities were identified within 30 calendar days of the audit.

6. Corrective Action Procedure agreed on between Auditor & NSP

In order to become certified in the 4R Program, the Nutrient Service Provider must satisfy all applicable requirements in the *4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Standard*. For example, a Nutrient Service Provider will need to satisfy all 28 of the Year 1 requirements for the first audit in the program. If any non-conformities were identified during the audit, the client will receive a Corrective Action Request (CAR) along with the audit report. The client will need to satisfactorily address the non-conformities by submitting a Corrective Action Plan (CAP) and supporting evidence in order to be considered for certification. Supporting evidence for each corrective action may include the following: specific timeline, lead person to implement, completed event agenda, documentation of change in procedure, or sample maps. It is recommended the Nutrient Service Provider complete the CAP within 30 calendar days of receiving the audit report. The client will do so by sending their completed Corrective Action Plan to the auditor for review, with any supporting evidence. Upon review, the auditor will determine whether the non-conformities were satisfactorily addressed, and respond to the NSP within 10 days any additional supporting evidence that is needed. Once all non-conformities have been satisfactorily addressed the CAP will be considered "closed" based on the information provided. The costs for the audit and audit report and corrective action plan, if needed, is outlined in Table 3.

7. Certification Decision

In cases where no non-conformities were noted during the audit, the Certification Body will review the final version of the audit report and will issue a certification recommendation. In cases where non-conformities were reported, the Certification Body will review both the audit report and proposed corrective actions, once the CAP review has been closed by the auditor, and will issue a certification recommendation. The Nutrient Stewardship Council will review the recommendation and make a final decision on certification. In cases where it is not possible to grant certification, the certification administrator and/or auditor will include a formal explanation in writing for the client.

⁵ The Certification Body is made up of Nutrient Stewardship Council representatives, excluding the agricultural retailers.

8. Post-Certification Actions & Final Auditor Invoice

Nutrient Service Providers will be required to undergo an audit every year and submit their annual program registration fee of \$600 in order to maintain status in the program. In some cases, a remote audit will be sufficient to maintain status in the program, provided the Nutrient Service Provider demonstrates good performance in prior years during an onsite audit, as explained above.

4R Nutrient Certified Logo Use: All 4R Certification logos used in presentations, in print or electronically need to meet the guidelines as listed on the www.nutrientstewardship.com website.

4R Certification Suspension: The certification of a Nutrient Service Provider may be suspended in certain cases, for reasons such as failing to undergo the annual audit, failing to submit annual program registration fee, non-compliance with the 4R Standard without sufficient corrective action process, and voluntary cancellation.

4 References

4R Program Documents

4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Standard: Requirements for Nutrient Service Providers in the Lake Erie Watershed and all of Ohio, V. 2.9, September 2017

4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program Application V. 6, March 2016

4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program: Audit Checklist/Report Template V. 3, May 2018.

External References

International Plant Nutrition Institute (IPNI). *4R Plant Nutrition: A Manual for Improving the Management of Plant Nutrition*. North American Version. Norcross, GA, 2012.

International Plant Nutrition Institute (IPNI). *4R Nutrient Stewardship Portal*. <http://www.ipni.net/4R> Accessed February 2013.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). *National Weather Service*. <http://www.weather.gov/>. Accessed April 2013.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). *Conservation Practice Standard. Nutrient Management (Ac.) Code 590*. http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1046433.pdf January 2012.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). *Field Office Technical Guide Locator* http://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/efotg_locator.aspx Accessed April 2013.

Vitosh, ML, Johnson, JW, Mengel, DB, eds. *Tri-State Fertilizer Recommendations for Corn, Soybeans, Wheat and Alfalfa. Bulletin E-2567*. <http://ohioline.osu.edu/e2567/index.html> Accessed February 2013.

The Fertilizer Institute (TFI). *Nutrient Stewardship | The Right Time for Nutrient Stewardship Is Right Now*. <http://www.nutrientstewardship.com> Accessed February 2013.

CONTACT/QUESTIONS

Questions about the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program or this document should be directed to the 4R Program Administrator:

Ohio AgriBusiness Association

Address: 5151 Reed Rd. Suite 126-C, Columbus, OH 43220

Phone: +1.614.326.7520 ext. 1

4R Program Administrator: Andrew Allman

Email: aallman@oaba.net

Online: www.4Rcertified.org