

# 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Manual

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# 1 Introduction

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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 (NSPs) 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 Canadian provinces, that have adopted or evaluating 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, 2019).

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 requirement Standards for each geographic region.

# 2 Terms and Definitions

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**Audit Report:** The report that is prepared by a third-party auditor using the *4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program Auditor Checklist* (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 Nutrient Stewardship Council Certification Body will attest in writing that a Nutrient Service Provider’s services and operations conform to specified requirements.

**Certification Body:** Nutrient Stewardship Council directors and independent contractor who reviews audit reports to ensure that consistency amongst earned certification holders is present. The collective parties determine certification status of a Nutrient Service Provider and makes certification recommendations to the full Nutrient Stewardship Council.

**Conformity:** A finding that the Nutrient Service Provider 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 steps should include corrective and preventive actions to be taken, the person(s) responsible, and the expected timeframe for implementation.

**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 by the auditor at the time that the audit report is provided to a Nutrient Service Provider.

**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 Nutrient Service Provider provides following services - conducts the soil sampling for nutrient recommendations, makes the nutrient recommendations and applies the nutrients.
- Recommendation only: The Nutrient Service Provider only provides the nutrient recommendations for the grower customer.
- Application only: The Nutrient Service Provider only applies the nutrients for the grower customer.
- Other: The Nutrient Service Provider does not provide nutrient recommendations or apply nutrients for the grower customer. The Nutrient Service Provider may conduct soil samples or sell nutrients to the grower customer but there is no influence of the Nutrient Service Provider as to source, rate, timing or placement of fertilizer. These customers are not included in the Nutrient Service Provider's customer/acre population and is not included as certified customer or acres figures that are made available to the public.

**Non-Conformity:** A finding that the Nutrient Service Provider is not meeting a requirement within the *4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Standard*. Non-conformities will be made available to the Nutrient Service Provider in detail within the audit report.. Satisfactory responses to non-conformities are required through a corrective action process in order for the Nutrient Service Provider to achieve 4R Certification.. The term "Non-Conformity" may be used as a synonym for "Non-Compliance" issue" and both terms (i.e., Non-Conformity and Non-Compliance) may be abbreviated as "NC".

**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 governing body of the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program. The Nutrient Stewardship Council is composed of various, diverse 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., application equipment) of the Nutrient Service Provider.

**Program Administrator:** Contracted organization with the Nutrient Stewardship Council responsible for overseeing the audit process, including the identification, selection, training and monitoring of 4R Auditors. The organization is responsible for day-day operations of the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program. Duties of the Program Administrator also 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:** A progress report can be requested as a step within the Decertification Process. The Progress Report represents an assurance to the Nutrient Stewardship Council's Certification Body that the Nutrient Service Provider is carrying out the Corrective Action Plan submitted or was being implemented at the time of the audit.

**Remote Audit:** Assessing conformance to the audit 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. Nutrient Service Providers have to be eligible to participate in Remote Audits based on performance in the initial audit cycle.

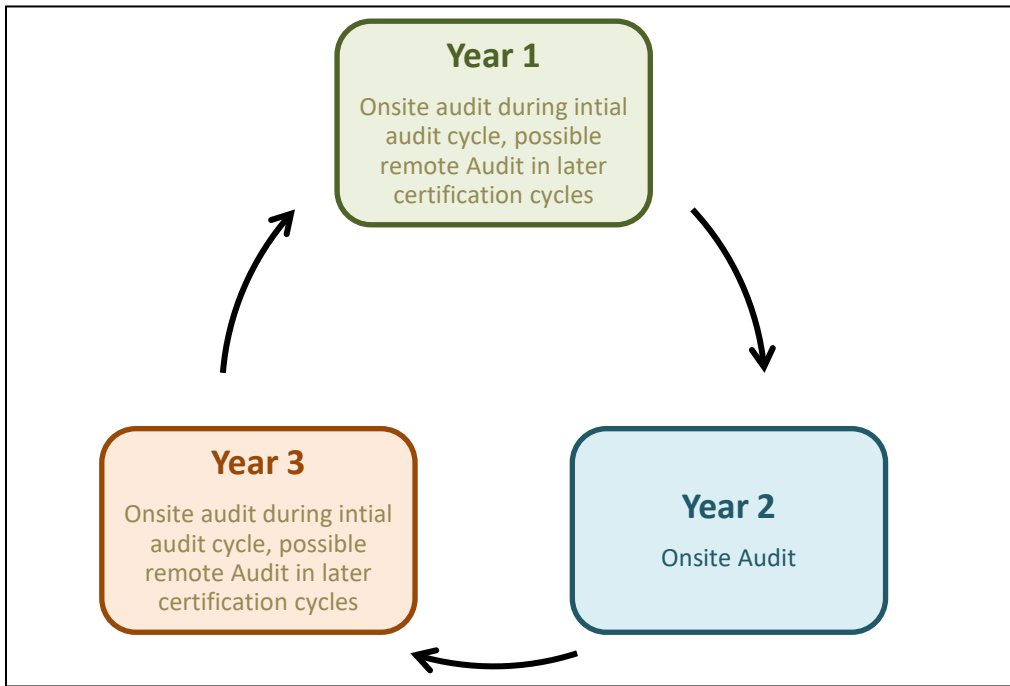
**Standard:** In general, the normative reference by which a decision to award certification is made. For the purposes of this document, when capitalized, "Standard" refers to the specific requirements established for the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Program.

### 3 The Certification Process

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The 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program is based 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 in accordance with all Standard requirements according to the results of the onsite audits in Years 1 through 3, the Nutrient Service Provider would be eligible to *request* a Remote Audit in Year Four. From that point, every other year could be performed as a Remote Audit, at the discretion of the auditor and Program Administrator.

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



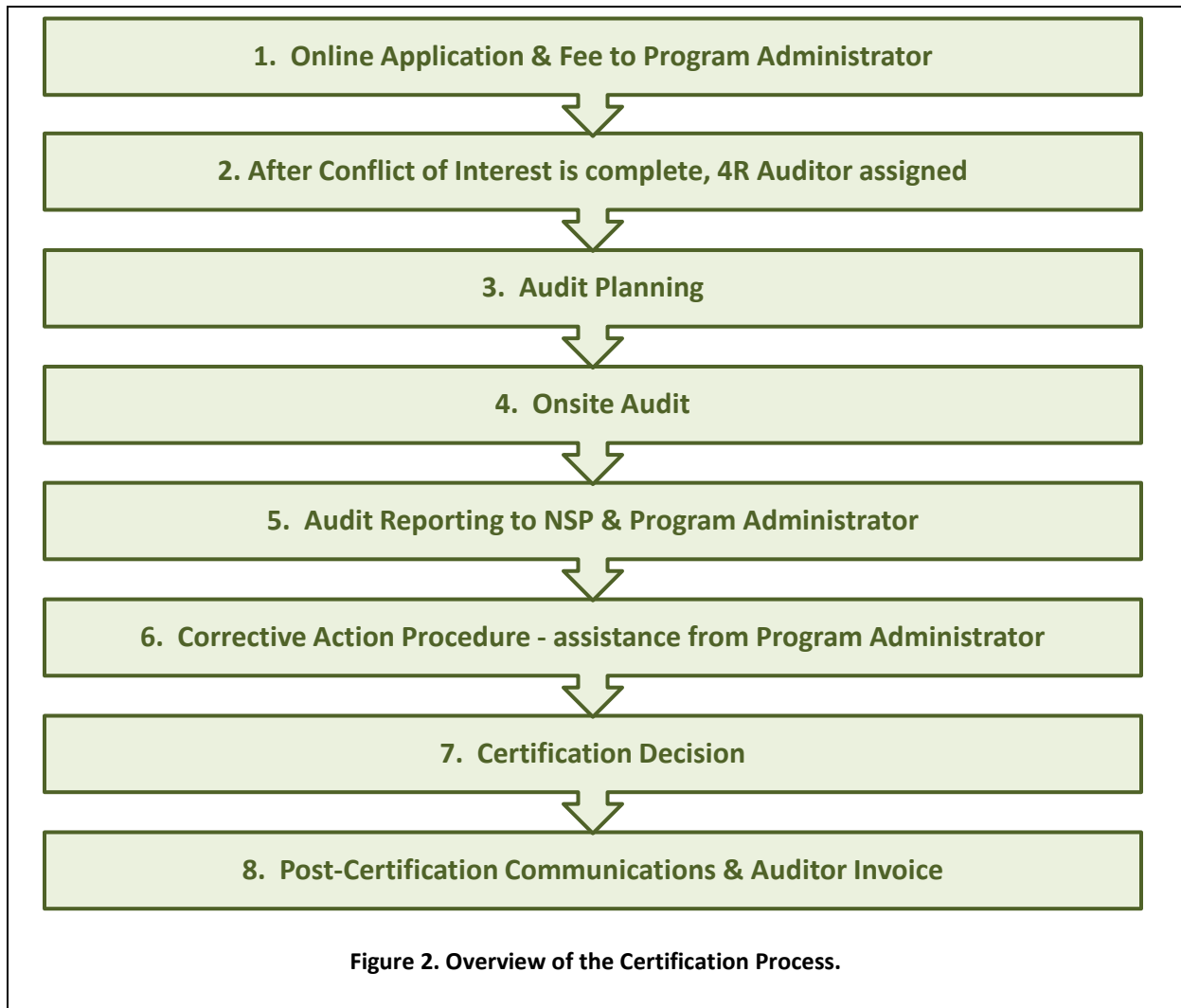
The 4R Standard includes a total of 31 requirements, 22 applicable in Year 1, 4 that become applicable in Year 2, and 5 that become applicable in Year 3, as indicated in **Table 1** below. **Note that all 31 requirements are applicable for every year following Year 3.** Therefore, while Year 4 would represent the first year in the certification cycle, all 31 requirements would be applicable.

Audit Year	# Requirements	# Requirements (Cumulative)
1	22	22
2	4	26
3	5	31

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

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.*

If a Nutrient Service Provider has zero non compliance issues in their year 4 audit or subsequent audits, the nutrient service provider can forego the following year’s audit. The year after foregoing the audit, an in person audit is required. Provided there are no compliance issues, a NSP can continue in this alternating year format of in person audits and foregoing an audit. If a non compliance issue arises, a corrective action plan must be developed and the following year must be an in person audit again. In the year foregoing the audit, they are still required to submit the online application, program application fee, and sign an acknowledgement document stating they are still meeting all requirements of the program.



### 1. Online 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*. The online application is found at [4raudit.org](http://4raudit.org). Users click on the “Interest Form” button and will be sent a link to continue the application process. Once completed, the application is submitted and the program administrator is notified. A **\$600 annual program registration fee** will be invoiced to the interested NSP and 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. Nutrient Service Providers 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, an

auditor is selected for the Nutrient Service Provider based on schedule and proximity. Auditors are not permitted to audit a facility within 25 miles of his or her residence or occupation locations. The Program Administrator will then provide the application of the Nutrient Service Provider to the auditor. The 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 or Remote Audit, Report, and Corrective Action Request (if applicable)	Not to exceed \$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

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. 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. This will be requested two weeks prior to the audit. Sample selections will be delivered to the nutrient service provider 48 hours prior to the audit. This will provide adequate time for the nutrient service provider to gather records. During the audit procedures onsite, the auditor will select, at a minimum, two (2) additional random selections.

### 4. Onsite or Remote Audit and 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*. Remote audits will be conducted by the auditor offsite, and will require the auditor to be provided 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 was unable to supply requested documents during the scheduled onsite audit day. This may require the auditor to come onsite for a portion of a second onsite day.

Remote audit procedures are currently being developed. For more information about remote audits, please contact the Program Administrator.

Note that the scope of the 4R Program audit covers a single agronomy facility or independent crop consultant location of the Nutrient Service Provider entity. Separate audits are required for Nutrient Service Providers with separate agronomy facility operations or multi-facility locations.

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

## **5. Audit Reporting to Nutrient Service Provider 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 within the Auditor Checklist*. 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 22 of the Year 1 requirements for the first audit in the program. If any non-conformities were identified during the audit, the Nutrient Service Provider will receive a Corrective Action Request (CAR) along with the audit report. The Nutrient Service Provider 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 Nutrient Service Provider will do so by sending its completed Corrective Action Plan to the auditor for review, with any supporting evidence, if necessary. Upon review, the auditor will determine whether the non-conformities were satisfactorily addressed and respond to the NSP within 10 days if any additional supporting evidence 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.

## **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 onsite audits, as explained above. If a Nutrient Service Provider has zero non compliance issues in their year 4 audit or subsequent audits, the nutrient service provider can forego the following year's audit. The year after foregoing the audit, an in person audit is required. Provided there are no compliance issues, a NSP can continue in this alternating year format of in person audits and foregoing an audit. If a non compliance issue arises, a corrective action plan must be developed and the following year must be an in person audit again. In the year foregoing the audit, they are still required to submit the online application, program application fee, and sign an acknowledgement document stating they are still meeting all requirements of the program.

*4R Nutrient Certified Logo Use:* All 4R Certification logos used in presentations, in print or electronically need to be reviewed by the Program Administrator.

*4R Certification Program Decertification Guidelines:* The certification of a Nutrient Service Provider may be suspended in certain cases, as outlined in the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program Guidelines document; see Appendix A.

## **4 References**

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### **4R Program Documents**

*4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Standard: Version 5, October 2019*

*4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program Application V. 7, August 2018*

*4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program: Audit Checklist/Report Template V. 6, January 2023.*

### **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 November 2019.

The Fertilizer Institute (TFI). *Nutrient Stewardship | The Right Time for Nutrient Stewardship Is Right Now*. <http://www.nutrientstewardship.com> Accessed November 2019.

## 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:** Aaron Heilers

**Email:** aheilers@oaba.net

**Online:** www.4Rcertified.org

## APPENDIX A



### 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program Decertification Guidelines

Certification may be revoked or suspended\* if a Nutrient Service Provider or Independent Crop Consultant (NSPs):

- A. Is found to provide false information to the auditor or Certification Sub-Committee
- B. Egregiously violates a standard(s) or Law
- C. Does not become compliant with Corrective Action Plan as proposed after the audit that gained or maintained its certification
- D. Does not pay annual application or auditor fees
- E. NSP changes ownership and new ownership does not wish to comply or participate in the program

*\*only by majority vote of the NSC will a certification be revoked or suspended*

If the NSP is found to have violated any of the items A through D, the following steps may apply.

1. Progress Report: The NSC needs assurance that the institution is carrying out the Correction Action Plan that was submitted or was being implemented at the time of the audit.
2. Warning\*\*: The NSC acts to warn the NSP that its certification status may be in jeopardy when the NSP is found to have not been in compliance with the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program's Standard requirements. A monitoring report is required from the NSP to demonstrate that the NSP has made appropriate improvements to bring itself into compliance of the Standard of the program.

*\*\*a warning indicates that the NSC believes that, although the NSP is out of compliance, the NSP has the capacity to make appropriate improvements within a reasonable period of time to comply with the standard.*

3. Probation: The NSC places a NSP on probation when, in the NSC's judgement, the NSP is not in compliance with one or more of the Standards and that non-compliance is sufficiently serious or extensive that raises concern of the NSP's ability to make appropriate improvements in a timely manner. In probation: the NSP must prove in a form as requested by the NSC that it will make the necessary changes to gain compliance or certification will be revoked.
4. Revoke Certification: The NSC revokes the certification from the NSP as a result of determination that the NSP has not, cannot, or will not conform to the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program Standards.

\*If the Certification is revoked, the NSC will notify the NSP and request the certification sign be removed from the property and any promotional items with the certified logo be destroyed as well.

The NSC reserves the right to alter the order of disciplinary action described above, eliminate disciplinary steps, or to implement new disciplinary measures with a majority vote. The Certification Sub-Committee will review and report to the NSC the information necessary for voting decisions.

**Complaint Procedure:**

Any complaint received should be directed to the Executive Director of the NSC.

1. Complaint should be in writing and signed
2. The Executive Director will contact the auditor (who performed the audit if at all possible), Board Chair, and Certification Sub-Committee Members. The auditor will be asked to follow up into the complaint and to report back to the certification sub-committee the findings.
3. The certification sub-committee will report to the NSC the findings and any disciplinary actions will be determined.