



4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Standards Manual

Requirements for Certification
of Nutrient Service Providers in Ontario

Version 3.0
April 2026



FERTILIZER CANADA

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INTRODUCTION

The fertilizer industry has established the 4R Nutrient Stewardship framework in cooperation with government, researchers, customers, farm organizations, conservation groups and the public. Adjustments in the crop nutrient source and application rate, timing, and placement method will support agricultural productivity while also helping to improve the water quality of the Great Lakes, specifically Lake Erie and its contributing watersheds.



The **Right Source** means ensuring a balanced supply of essential plant nutrients including granular fertilizers, liquid fertilizers and/or manures.



The **Right Rate** is applying just enough fertilizer to meet the needs of the plant while accounting for the nutrients already in the soil.



The **Right Time** means applying fertilizer when the plant will get the most benefit and avoiding times when fertilizer can be lost to the environment.



The **Right Place** is where the plants can easily use fertilizer and where it is less likely to be lost to the water or air.

The 4R Certification standards were created in 2018 by the 4R Ontario Steering Committee in close collaboration with the Nutrient Stewardship Council, the Ohio Agri-Business Association and The Fertilizer Institute in the U.S. to ensure alignment between cross-border efforts to implement 4R Nutrient Stewardship and minimize nutrient losses under the 4R Certification Program. The standards are reflective of the best available science, technology and regulatory requirements for Ontario conditions. Members of the initial 4R Ontario Steering Committee represented a diversity of stakeholders including Fertilizer Canada; the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA); the Ontario Agri Business Association (OABA); the Grain Farmers of Ontario; the Ontario Federation of Agriculture; the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario; Conservation Ontario; The Nature Conservancy – Ohio; Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks; Plant Nutrition Canada; the Ontario Certified Crop Advisor Association; and agri-retailers.

In implementing this 4R Certification Program, the 4R Ontario Steering Committee sought feedback to ensure a consistent, recognized program for agricultural retailers, agricultural service providers, and certified professionals to help ensure that 4R Nutrient Stewardship goals are adopted and that in turn lead to long term positive impacts on water quality. While these standards do not apply to individual growers, on-farm adoption of the recommendations made by Nutrient Service Providers that become certified under the standards is critical to meeting the goal of improved water quality.

In addition to general principles of 4R Nutrient Stewardship, the standards have incorporated specific criteria for the purpose of addressing regional priorities for water quality, including references to regional soil fertility recommendations and requirements that prevent nutrient application on frozen ground.

The standards are intended to support the adoption of 4R Nutrient Stewardship by specifying best practices for nutrient recommendations and nutrient application. The standards also include an education component to ensure that new practices related to nutrient stewardship are adopted by the Nutrient Service Providers and shared with their grower customers.

The 4R Ontario Steering Committee members continuously work with the research community to help identify the most effective conservation and nutrient management practices to ensure the standards stay up to date and incorporate the most current research available.

GOALS

The 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification standards were initially drafted as part of a voluntary initiative to improve the watershed conditions of the Western Lake Erie Basin. The standards were created to address the following goals:

- optimize crop uptake of nutrients and minimize nutrient losses;
- create long-term positive impacts on water bodies associated with agricultural production areas, including the reduction of eutrophication and incidence of harmful algal blooms, and helping to meet water quality standards;
- encourage sharing of the most up-to-date information about responsible nutrient stewardship with Nutrient Service Providers, growers, and other interested groups; and
- help the agricultural sector adapt to new research and technology in the area of nutrient stewardship.

SCOPE

The 4R Nutrient Stewardship Program, of which these standards are a central component, is designed to recognize Nutrient Service Providers who have adopted the principles and practices of 4R Nutrient Stewardship. These standards translate 4R Nutrient Stewardship into a set of auditable criteria.

The 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program is voluntary and applies to Nutrient Service Providers working in the Lake Erie watershed region and all of Ontario, including agricultural retailers, agricultural service providers, and certified professionals. **The standards apply exclusively to agri-retailers and are not intended to be directed at growers.**

STRUCTURE AND IMPLEMENTATION

The standards are divided into the following sections:

1. Training and Education
2. Recommendations
3. Application
4. Documentation

Sections 1, 2 and 4 apply to all types of Nutrient Service Providers pursuing certification. Parts of Section 3 may not be applicable for those Nutrient Service Providers that only make recommendations (i.e. independent crop consultants). Audit protocols that are not applicable to “recommendation only” nutrient service providers are indicated with an * in the box.

Each group consists of auditable evaluation criteria, which form the basis of the standards. **There is a total of 29 auditable evaluation criteria. Of that total: 5 address training and education, 10 address nutrient recommendations, 7 address nutrient application, and 7 address maintenance of proper documentation.**

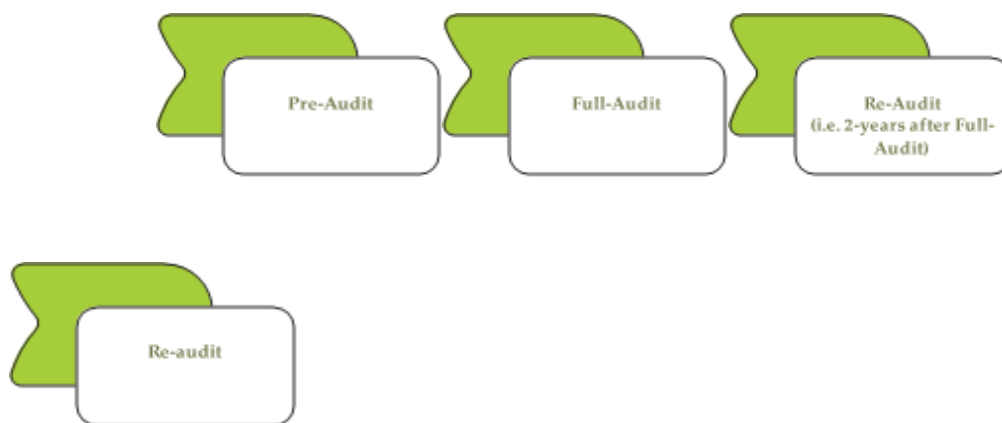
In most cases, a Nutrient Service Provider will offer nutrient recommendations or nutrient application services or both to growers. Please see the following section for specific compliance levels required for certification in the first cycle of implementation.

Using the standards as the normative reference, audits will be conducted by accredited third-party auditors to determine whether a specified agricultural retailer, agricultural service provider, or crop adviser, acting as a Nutrient Service Provider, has met the requirements of the standards. The degree of conformance to the standards will be assessed by the auditor, who will evaluate each audit protocol as: Compliant, Non-compliant, or Not Applicable.

COMPLIANCE CYCLE

Nutrient service providers can begin their 4R Certification process by contacting an auditor to schedule a pre-audit. Auditors will review and confirm that the facility's existing recordkeeping, policies, and operational procedures meet requirements, and will provide specific feedback on any gaps to help ensure the site is on track to pass the first full audit. This first full audit typically takes place within the year after the pre-audit. If passed, the facility will be considered 4R Certified and be on a two-year audit cycle for recertification.

New facilities should note that the standard of documentation required at their full audit depends on the compliance cycle in which they begin the program. Record-keeping expectations increase across Compliance Cycles 1, 2, and 3. Facilities should refer to the compliance cycle columns in the standards tables below to determine the level of documentation and evidence required for their audit year.



STANDARD REQUIREMENTS

Ontario 4R Certification Standards					
T	Training				
R	Recommendation				
A	Application				
D	Documentation				
Req No.	Requirement	Evidence	Compliance 1 st Cycle	Compliance 2 nd Cycle	Compliance 3 rd Cycle
T1	Nutrient Service Providers, sales, and application staff have undergone training and staff are able to demonstrate knowledge about 4R Nutrient Stewardship and the 4R Certification Program.	All applicable staff have undergone 4R training every audit cycle. Evidence may include meeting agendas, staff sign-in education log, training materials indicating 4R concepts and topics covered. Essential training may include Fertilizer Canada's eLearning modules or 4R Nutrient Management Specialist training for Ontario Staff to be interviewed and able to answer key 4R concepts including (Right Rate, Time, Place & Source). Note: 4R Educational information and sample presentations are available at https://fertilizercanada.ca/membership/e-learning/.	100%	100%	100%
T2	Certified professionals must have current certification in good standing.	All certified professionals (Certified Crop Advisor (CCA) or Certified Nutrient Management Professional (CNMP) on staff should have available a copy of current credential certificate (either electronic or hard copy). With full name and certification cycle date(s).	100%	100%	100%
T3	Nutrient Service Provider staff members who are not certified professionals making nutrient stewardship recommendations must attend 5 hours of 4R training annually. All recommendations are signed off by a CCA.	Evidence may include CCA-approved events, Fertilizer Canada's eLearning materials or similar 4R training programming. Sample criteria for an appropriate event could include: • Event/conference date / title / location • Session title / duration / speaker(s) • Session description (e.g. duration of event should focus on application of 4R	100%	100%	100%

		principles and/or 4R Certification) CCA credits			
T4	Nutrient Application staff members that do not have a CCA or CNMP designation must attend 4 hours of 4R training per audit cycle.	All applicable nutrient staff has undergone applicable 4R training. Evidence may include listing of applicable training sessions attended including meeting agendas; training materials covered indicating 4R concepts and verification of attendance.	100%	100%	100%
T5	Nutrient Service Provider has distributed informational materials on 4R Nutrient Stewardship concepts to growers on an annual basis.	Evidence may include: proof of distribution of materials via mailing/email list, meeting description, approved training materials covering 4R concepts. Example communications may include: - Email blasts - Letters - Brochures - Providing local training sessions on 4R Nutrient Stewardship - Meeting agendas with 4R Nutrient Stewardship topics - Social media	100%	100%	100%

Ontario 4R Certification Standards					
Req No.	Requirement	Evidence	Compliance 1 st Cycle	Compliance 2 nd Cycle	Compliance 3 rd Cycle
R1	Soil (analysis) tests are conducted by an OMAFA accredited lab which include, at minimum: organic matter, Phosphorus (Olsen), Potassium, and pH.	Review of soil testing records on file, (hard copy or electronic). Minimum lab criteria must be indicated on the records.	100%	100%	100%
R2	Soil tests are conducted at least once every 4 years.	Review of records on file (hard copy or electronic). Most recent soil test result may not be older than 4 years old.	50%	75%	90%
R3	Soil Samples are taken at an appropriate depth from relatively uniform areas no larger than 25 acres	Review company sampling policy. If a 3 rd party is used then they must provide proof that the policy is being followed.	100%	100%	100%

Ontario 4R Certification Standards

Req No.	Requirement	Evidence	Compliance 1 st Cycle	Compliance 2 nd Cycle	Compliance 3 rd Cycle
R4	If manure is applied, its content of total and available nutrients is based on either OMAFA's database average for the specific manure type or using sampling and analysis following recognized guidelines.	Evidence should include manure sampling guidance document, and applicable staff training. Review manure nutrient analysis records (hard copy or electronic), use of OMAFA or Nutrient Management Act (NMA) values, if a manure sample has not been taken.	100%	100%	100%
R5	Nutrient recommendations address minimum setbacks from all known sensitive areas, such as tile inlets, well heads, gullies, and water bodies specified in applicable national, provincial, or local laws.	Evidence may include: minimum environmental set back reference document based on federal / provincial requirements, process to ensure local/municipal requirements are documented and adhered to, and actual applied maps. Evidence should include process to ensure that growers are asked to self-identify environmentally sensitive areas on their farms (documented via formal request and receipt of information from grower to retailer)	25%	75%	100%
R6	Attainable crop yield and quality goals are discussed with the grower and are based on previous crop yield history	Evidence should include: process to ensure that grower dialogue involving crop yield and quality goals are documented. Crop yield and quality goals take field variability into account (+/- 20%). Information as part of documentation may include: review of records on file, previous yield history, appropriate regional averages or local adaptive management research.	50%	75%	90%
R7	Recommended nutrient application rates are at or below limits specified by nutrient application recommendations recognized by government or academic institution.	Records will be compared to credible government or academic nutrient recommendations. If nutrient rates are above previously noted authorities, data from adaptive management research must be presented justifying the modified	100%	100%	100%

nutrient recommendation.					
R8	If nitrogen fertilizer is broadcast on bare ground or is not applied to a growing crop it must be incorporated within 24 hours. It is recommended to be applied with an urease inhibitor or in controlled-release form. Discussions on nitrogen management also include options of split application, inhibitors and/or other slow-release technology.	Evidence should include: application guidance document, acknowledgement that grower information has been conveyed (i.e. in fertilizer recommendations) and applied maps indicate adherence to guidance document.	100%	100%	100%

Ontario 4R Certification Standards

Req No.	Requirement	Evidence	Compliance 1 st Cycle	Compliance 2 nd Cycle	Compliance 3 rd Cycle
R9	The total amount of phosphorus recommended does not exceed the quantity required for the next two years of planned crops. If a prescribed material is used, the Nutrient Management Act Technical Standard must be followed.	Records will be compared to recognized recommendation source. Field averages will be used to evaluate this criteria. Records of individual soil test will be compared to the credible recommendation source or equivalent tool. Crop nutrients regulated under the Nutrient Management Act must follow Technical Standard of the Nutrient Management Act.	100%	100%	100%
R10	Where in-field variability in crop nutrient needs or environmental risk is identified and variable rate application is warranted, site specific nutrient application is recommended.	Review of records on file (hard copy or electronic). Maps must be provided. Consideration is targeted towards fields that are 25 acres or larger.	100%	100%	100%
A1	Nutrients applied by the Nutrient Service Provider should not exceed recommended rates with an acceptable margin of error for calibrated equipment.	Review of records on file (hard copy or electronic). Nutrient recommendations and applied scale ticket or as-applied map (5% margin of error). Records of application will be compared to the recommendations on file.	100%	100%	100%
A2	Phosphorus injection, subsurface banding, or broadcasting with immediate incorporation are the recommended placement methods unless the risk of phosphorus loss to surface water has been demonstrated to be low according to a provincially approved phosphorus index risk assessment procedure such as the Agri suite tool	Evidence should include: application guidance document, acknowledgement that grower information has been conveyed (i.e. fertilizer application recommendations).	100%	100%	100%

Ontario 4R Certification Standards					
Req No.	Requirement	Evidence	Compliance 1 st Cycle	Compliance 2 nd Cycle	Compliance 3 rd Cycle
A3	Crop nutrient applications are neither made nor recommended to be made on frozen or snow-covered ground.	Evidence should include application guidance document, acknowledgement that grower information has been conveyed (i.e. fertilizer application recommendations) and applied maps indicate adherence to document. Note: Frozen ground is defined: when soil conditions are such that tillage or nutrient incorporation and/or injection after application are not possible at the time of nutrient application, and will not be possible within the next 48 hours as a result of frozen conditions. Snow-covered ground is defined: when soil cannot be seen because of snow cover as per the Nutrient Management Act.	100%	100%	100%
A4	All custom nutrient application equipment (including third party applicators) must be calibrated annually.	Evidence should include: calibration guidance document, applicable staff training, records indicating equipment service date and any maintenance/service required. To be completed at a minimum annually.	100%	100%	100%

Ontario 4R Certification Standards

Req No.	Requirement	Evidence	Compliance 1 st Cycle	Compliance 2 nd Cycle	Compliance 3 rd Cycle
A5	Broadcast applications of crop nutrients without immediate incorporation are neither made nor recommended unless a documented local weather forecast (verifiable private or government generated) indicates less than a 50% chance of a rainfall event involving more than 25mm (one inch) of rain beginning in the next 12 hours.	Evidence should include application guidance document, acknowledgement that grower information has been conveyed (i.e. fertilizer recommendations) and applied maps indicate adherence to guidance document. Note: The current weather forecast for the nearest town available to the fields must be reviewed as per the corporate policy within 12 hours of application.	100%	100%	100%
A6	All records of nutrient application (including third party applicators) include at minimum: • Method of application • Time of application • Field map showing locations of application; nutrient source & rate • Setback distances were followed • Weather forecast for the day of application.	Review of records on file, can be hard copy or electronic.	50%	75%	100%
A7	No application and/or recommendation of fall nitrogen other than co-applied with Phosphorus sources or to meet fall planting Nitrogen requirements. . If a prescribed material is used, the Nutrient Management Act Technical Standard must be followed.	Evidence should include application guidance document, acknowledgement that grower information has been conveyed (i.e. fertilizer application recommendations) and applied maps indicate adherence to guidance document. Note: No application or recommendation for fall application of N other than for what is included in P sources or is used for winter wheat or cover crop.	100%	100%	100%

Ontario 4R Certification Standards					
Req No.	Requirement	Evidence	Compliance 1 st Cycle	Compliance 2 nd Cycle	Compliance 3 rd cycle
D1	Nutrient Service Provider will provide the auditor with a list of growers organized by the staff responsible for recommendations and applications	Evidence should include: • A comprehensive list of agronomists who made nutrient recommendations and/or applicators who conducted nutrient applications during the audit cycle. • Acreage records demonstrating that each agronomist and/or applicator has at least 500 auditable acres available for assessment, derived from a minimum of three growers. • Supporting documents such as nutrient recommendations, application records, work orders, and as-applied maps for the acres selected. • Verification that the same growers were not used for the same agronomist and/or applicator in the immediately preceding audit cycle.	100%	100%	100%
D2	Nutrient Service Provider maintains records related to all nutrient and application recommendations.	Information must be provided to auditor prior to audit. Review of select records on file such as fertilizer recommendations and applied scale ticket or as-applied maps.	100%	100%	100%
D3	Records related to growers are kept confidential by the Nutrient Service Provider and are made available for review during an audit.	Evidence should include: Confidentiality statement with Nutrient Service Provider and growers. Records are kept confidential as demonstrated with computer codes, file cabinets, or “safe” rooms or confidentiality agreement with the grower .	100%	100%	100%
D4	Nutrient Service Provider keeps onsite list and/or copies (either electronic or hard copy) of relevant national and provincial laws related to nutrient recommendations and application.	Evidence should include listing of applicable federal/provincial regulatory requirements.	100%	100%	100%

D5	Records of individual fields that are accessible to the retailer and made available to the grower include, at minimum: • field boundary, soil type • current soil test results, nutrient recommendations • crop yield goals used for making recommendations, and • rates applied to each field	Evidence should include guidance documents, acknowledgement that grower information has been conveyed. Review of records on file, can be hard copy or electronic.	100%	100%	100%
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Ontario 4R Certification Standards					
Req No.	Requirement	Evidence	Compliance 1 st Cycle	Compliance 2 nd Cycle	Compliance 3 rd Cycle
D6	Nutrient Service Provider has documented that nutrient recommendations have been reviewed and acknowledged by the grower.	Evidence should include: nutrient recommendation acknowledgement that grower information has been conveyed.	50%	75%	100%
D7	Nutrient recommendations for each grower have been approved and signed by a Certified Crop Advisor (CCA) or Certified Nutrient Management Planner.	Signatures of CCA or CNMP for each grower is on file, acknowledging that they approve the nutrient recommendation.	50%	75%	100%

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

4R: An approach for best nutrient management practices developed globally by the fertilizer industry (IPNI, 2016). “4R” refers to the “Right source, applied at the Right rate, at the Right time in the Right place.” The philosophy of the 4R approach is to base nutrient recommendations and application on scientific principles, including site-specific considerations and adaptive management, with the goal of improved sustainability.

Adaptive Management: An ongoing process of developing improved practices for efficient production and resource conservation by use of participatory learning through continuous, systematic assessment. For the purposes of the Standard, the demonstration of adaptive management includes documented on farm data showing reasonable expectation of improved crop yield without increased risk of harm to water quality.

Agricultural Retailer: An entity that sells agricultural services or inputs.

Agricultural Service Provider: An entity that provides agronomic services related to agricultural production.

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

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

Certified Professional: An individual that has the designation of at least one of the following: Certified Crop Adviser (CCA), Canadian Nutrient Management Professional (CNMP).

Cover Crop: A crop grown for the protection and enrichment of the soil, which is usually established between periods of regular crop production (e.g., grasses, legumes, clover).

Corrective Action Plan: 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.

Continuing Education Unit (CEU): One (1) CEU is defined as one (1) hour of quality contact time in training or other qualifying activity addressing the continuing education criterion. For the purposes of the Standard, a qualifying CEU must have been approved by a Certified Crop Adviser (CCA) state board.

Crop Adviser: An individual who provides advice to grower customers about crop management and inputs.

Eutrophication: The enrichment of water bodies with nutrients that stimulates proliferation of aquatic plant life.

Frozen Ground: For the purposes of this Standard, frozen ground is when soil conditions are such that tillage or nutrient incorporation and/or injection after application are not possible at the time of nutrient application and will not be possible within the next 48 hours as a result of frozen conditions.

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, or have nutrients applied by the Nutrient Service Provider.

Independent Consultant: An entity which is not involved in the sale of agricultural input but does provide Nutrient Services and recommendations to their client base.

Maintenance Limit: The upper limit of the maintenance range, a range of soil test levels within which the recommended rate aims to replenish crop removal. Soil test levels above the maintenance limit receive progressively lower rate recommendations, usually declining to zero at a level 10 to 20 ppm above the maintenance limit (for example, see Culman et al., 2020).

Nutrient Management Plan: A plan detailing a set of practices designed to maximize nutrient use efficiency and minimize nutrient losses. The criteria for nutrient management plans vary according to state (see NRCS, 2012)

Nutrient Stewardship: Planning and implementation of practices designed to manage crop nutrition for improved efficiency of crop production systems and optimization of nutrient use (see “4R”).

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, independent consultants, 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.

Setback: The spatial zone established between the edge of a crop to an identifiable feature such as a water body for the purpose of protecting the feature from adverse impacts.

Snow-covered: For the purposes of this Standard, snow-covered ground is when soil cannot be seen because of snow cover.

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.

Variable Rate Application (VRA): Application of nutrient according to site-specific rate requirements, as opposed to uniformly throughout a field.

Nutrient Service Provider (NSP) hereby applies to Fertilizer Canada for a Compliance Certificate in respect of the Site. In making this application, NSP acknowledges and agrees to the following:

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- (a) Operator accepts the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Code of Practice (4R Code) established by Fertilizer Canada from time to time and agrees to the appeal process established by Fertilizer Canada for the resolution of disputes arising with respect to the Site's compliance with the 4R Code.
 - (b) Operator understands and agrees that in order to obtain a Compliance Certificate for the Site, Operator must obtain independent certification by an independent auditor ("Auditor") that is approved by Fertilizer Canada, confirming that the Site is in compliance with the 4R Code. Operator is solely responsible for compliance with the 4R Code.
 - (c) Operator will permit access to the Site at reasonable times for the purposes of the audit of the Facility in connection with this application, and for any re-inspection of the Facility in accordance with Fertilizer Canada's quality control, compliance, and any other policies in effect. Operator agrees that the results of any audit may be disclosed to Fertilizer Canada, the Agricultural Warehouses Standards Association (AWSA), Funnel Communications Inc., or to such other project managers as Fertilizer Canada may designate from time to time.
 - (d) Subject to the appeal process established by Fertilizer Canada from time to time, Operator agrees to be bound by the Auditor's findings with respect to the Site.
 - (e) Operator agrees to pay any costs and expenses arising in connection with the certification of the Site and shall be the responsibility of the Operator.
 - (f) The Operator agrees to pay the established fees and agreed upon expenses of the Auditor as determined prior to the audit.
 - (g) Operator releases any and all claims it has or may in future have against Fertilizer Canada, the AWSA, CropLife Canada, Funnel Communications Inc., or such other project managers as Fertilizer Canada may designate from time to time, and their respective members, directors, officers and employees, any auditor or senior auditor in connection with this application, any audits conducted at the Site and any failure by the Operator to obtain a Compliance Certificate.
 - (h) If Operator obtains a Compliance Certificate in respect of the Site, Operator understands that the obligation to maintain the Site in accordance with the 4R Code is mandatory and Operator must continue to comply with the 4R Code in order to maintain its Compliance Certificate.

By accepting these terms, the Operator hereby releases any and all claims (including without limitation claims resulting from any damage, injury, loss or other claims) it has or may in future have against Fertilizer Canada, Funnel Communications Inc., or such other project managers as Fertilizer Canada may designate from time to time, or their directors, officers, employees, committee members, members, any auditors arising out of or in connection with this application, any audits conducted at the Site, any failure by the Operator to obtain a Compliance Certificate, or the acts or omissions of any person or entity with respect to the handling, storage, or misuse of calcium ammonium nitrate. Without limitation to the foregoing, the Operator hereby agrees to the terms of the "Disclaimer" set out in the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Code of Practice.