



# Leading Harvest 2025 Standard Revision Summary

## Overview

In late 2023, Leading Harvest assembled a dynamic coalition of volunteers - the Standards Committee - to spearhead the 2025 revision of its Farmland Management Standard. This diverse group brought together Leading Harvest Standard Users, auditors, industry leaders, and sustainability experts, united under the leadership of Scott Hansen, Director of Standards and Education. By January 2024, their monthly meetings were in full swing, analyzing key inputs that would shape the revised standard.

The committee's work was meticulous. They examined trends from audit results, addressed auditor feedback to refine the precision of indicator language, monitored evolving industry practices, and absorbed stakeholder insights. By mid-2024, these efforts crystallized into a first draft, which was reviewed by the Leading Harvest Resource Group in June before being opened to public consultation in September.

The public comment period spanned 60 days, inviting input from a broad spectrum of stakeholders. Nine voices rose to the occasion, including Standard Users, a Consumer Packaged Goods representative, an NGO, an independent sustainability expert, an educator, and a certification body representative. Each comment was carefully weighed and discussed among the Standards Committee, guiding the creation of a refined second draft in November 2024.

Beyond the Farmland Management Standard, the revision extended to three other normative documents: the Group Certification Module, the Standards Management Procedure, and the Certification Body Management Procedure. With a second draft ready for review in December and a final approval vote in January 2025 by the Board of Directors, Leading Harvest's standards revision exemplified its dedication to transparency, inclusivity, and innovation.

## One Farmland Management Standard

Since the launch of the Farmland Management Standard in the United States in 2020, there have been two other country-specific versions of the standard: Australia in 2023 and Canada in 2024. All three versions contain the same overarching and thematic content, with differences only in terminology to fit the country context.

A key goal of the 2025 revision was to end the process with one Farmland Management Standard that will be used in any country. Existing users of the standard from the U.S. and Australia may notice some of the indicator language has shifted to be more internationally

appropriate. The country-specific nuances are still accounted for but are now encompassed in the individual glossaries (USA, Australia, Canada, and International) and guidance documents.

The new Farmland Management Standard 2025 has a 12-month transition period, meaning existing users of the standard may continue to use (and be audited against) their country-specific standard for the next 12 months.

## Continuous Improvement

The topic of “continuous improvement” sits at the heart of any management system framework, including the Farmland Management Standard. As part of its own development and integrity, Leading Harvest also places high importance on continuous improvement within programs and business operations. The 5-year revision cycle was approved by the Leading Harvest Board of Directors quickly after the launch of the Farmland Management Standard in 2020 in recognition that industry trends and stakeholder priorities change, and that five years of audit reporting will provide data to support the identification of opportunities for improvement to the standard.

The Leading Harvest Standards Committee considered this audit report data, as industry trends and two categories of feedback in order to present a first draft of the revised Farmland Management Standard. The “audit report data” topic was considered by reviewing a catalog of conformance findings (conformance, nonconformance, opportunities for improvement, and notable practices), which identified standard indicators that were outliers and consider whether these select indicators were opportunities to improve the clarity or rigor of the standard. The “industry trends” topic was an analysis of other existing sustainable agriculture standards to identify gaps in the Farmland Management Standard that are commonly addressed in other certification schemes. The two categories of “feedback” were feedback from Leading Harvest auditors on the language used in the indicators and feedback repeatedly provided by stakeholders.

Once a first draft of the standard was completed by the Standards Committee, it was reviewed by the Leading Harvest Board of Directors and then posted publicly for a 60-day comment period. Feedback was received from nine different parties and each comment was considered by the Standards Committee. These deliberations resulted in the second (and final) draft of the Farmland Management Standard, which was voted on and approved by the Board of Directors in January 2025.

## Transparency

Transparency is an important part of any credible standard revision process, as stakeholders want to know why changes were made (or not made). An accompanying document to this letter is a version of the 2025 Farmland Management Standard showing tracked changes and comments in the margin. These features are important to show the process the Standards Committee went through during the revision.

It is also important to note that comments were received from nine different parties during the 60-day public stakeholder consultation period, four of which are current users of the Farmland Management Standard. Three of the other five stakeholders were representatives from a

Consumer Packaged Goods, an NGO, and a certification body. The final two stakeholders were an independent sustainability expert/consultant and an educator.

The 60-day public consultation period was a proactive invitation for feedback, but feedback on any aspect of the Leading Harvest standards is welcome at any time. As referenced above in “Continuous Improvement”, feedback collected throughout the years leading up to a revision is cataloged and given due consideration when drafting potential changes to the standard.

## Acknowledgements

At the end of the 2023 calendar year, Leading Harvest solicited stakeholders to apply for participation on the Standards Committee, the group that would carry out the work of drafting revisions to the Farmland Management Standard. Leading Harvest wanted a balanced group of volunteers that had the necessary experience and competence to have meaningful impact on the committee.

The following individuals were selected and their contributions to the revision process are greatly appreciated:

Carl Evers, AgIS Capital (Leading Harvest standard user and member of the Leading Harvest Independent Review Panel)

Kai Robertson, Corporate Sustainability Advisor

Max Feinberg, Verdova (Leading Harvest program supporter)

Amie Turner-Brown, Fresh Country Farms (Leading Harvest standard user)

Matt Armstrong, Averum (Leading Harvest lead auditor and certification body representative)