

Ohio Farmland Preservation: Keeping Ohio's Agricultural Tradition

REYNOLDSBURG, Ohio (Feb. 18, 2009) – Land is at the heart of agriculture, and farmland preservation is at the center of the Ohio Department of Agriculture's work to maintain the state's agricultural heritage while providing food, energy, products, and jobs. Food and agriculture together constitute the state's largest industry, contributing more than \$98 billion annually to the state's economy and providing jobs to one in seven Ohioans. The department's Farmland Preservation Office strives to educate the public about the importance of saving Ohio's valued farmland and to assist farmers and local officials with farmland protection efforts.

Ohio's Farmland is Vanishing at a Startling Rate

Between 1950 and 2000, Ohio lost more than 6.9 million acres of farmland, representing nearly one-third of Ohio's agricultural land and a size equivalent to 23 Ohio counties. Ohio is losing farmland at a much faster rate than other states, ranking second in the nation for lost farmland but only 22nd in the nation for population growth. It is up to today's generation to take steps toward protecting the agricultural land that still exists today.

Agricultural land suffers from development pressure, especially near Ohio's metropolitan areas. For example, the six-county ring around Cleveland (Lake, Geauga, Portage, Summit, Medina, and Lorain counties) produces more than \$241 million annually in agricultural products. Protecting this valuable farmland is essential to securing agricultural production in this region for years to come.

Ohio Farmers Want to Protect Their Land

The Ohio Department of Agriculture has worked to provide options to farmers who want to preserve their land for future generations. The department's easement programs have preserved nearly 200 farms totaling more than 35,000 acres since 1999. These programs entail voluntary legal agreements between the landowner, the local community, and the state that ensures farmland remains in agricultural use forever. Under an agricultural easement, the land itself stays under private ownership, but the easement prohibits any future non-agricultural development by landowners.

Tools to Protect Farmland

Clean Ohio Agricultural Easement Purchase Program (AEPP) - The program purchases agricultural easements from interested Ohio farmland owners. Awards are issued for up to 75 percent of the points-based appraised value of a farm's development rights. A payment cap has been set at \$2,000 per acre, with a maximum of \$500,000 per farm. All easement transactions are recorded on the property deed and transfer with the land to successive owners.

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Governor Strickland and the General Assembly's Bipartisan Jobs Stimulus Plan, a \$1.57 billion investment in Ohio's economy and infrastructure, includes a \$400-million bond continuation of the Clean Ohio Fund. The fund, similar to its original form in 2001, will preserve farmland and greenspace, develop recreational trails, and clean up brownfield sites. It will allocate \$25 million to purchase agricultural easements on productive farmland from willing landowners. The previous fund ran from 2002-2008 and set aside approximately \$3.12 million each year to purchase agricultural easements. The department's Office of Farmland Preservation received more than 1,800 Clean Ohio AEPP applications throughout that time, and with available funding, the department preserved 135 of those farms, totaling 26,813.88 acres, which includes pending offers.

Ohio Agricultural Easement Donation Program (AEDP) - Since 1999, the department has accepted the donation of agricultural easements from landowners who wish to protect their farm and keep it in agricultural production. Donations are evaluated individually, because certain legal requirements must be met in order for an easement to be granted. More than 5,300 acres have been preserved through the donation program.

Agricultural Security Area (ASA) – This program authorizes one or more landowners of at least 500 acres of contiguous farmland to request enrollment into an ASA for a 10-year period. This voluntary request is made through boards of township trustees and county commissioners. ASAs provide certain benefits to farmers that include protecting the land from non-agricultural development, maintaining a critical mass of land to help keep farming viable, and possibly providing tax exemptions on new real property. The department's Office of Farmland Preservation provides technical assistance to farmers and local officials in creating an ASA program. Since the creation of this program in 2005, there have been more than 17,800 acres enrolled in the ASA program.

Ohio Century Farm Program – The Ohio Department of Agriculture recognizes the social, economic, and historic contributions of Ohio's family farms through the Ohio Century Farm Program, which honors farms that have remained in the same family for at least 100 years. Information, including a registration form, is available on the department's Web site or by e-mailing centuryfarms@agri.ohio.gov.

Office of Farmland Preservation

For more information on Ohio's farmland preservation programs, visit www.agri.ohio.gov. Or, contact the Ohio Department of Agriculture's Farmland Preservation Office at 614-728-6210 or by e-mail at farmlandpres@agri.ohio.gov.

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