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Ohio Department of Agriculture Opens 2008 Application Period for Clean Ohio Ag Easement Purchase Program

REYNOLDSBURG, Ohio (March 4, 2008) - Ohio farmers wanting to preserve their farmland through the Clean Ohio Agricultural Easement Purchase Program (AEPP) can now find the 2008 application online at the Ohio Department of Agriculture's Web site. The applications, **due May 23**, are used by the department to evaluate and purchase agricultural easements in efforts to preserve the state's farmland.

The program is supported by the Clean Ohio Fund, which is in its seventh and final year, and will distribute \$3.125 million to farmland owners wanting to keep their land forever in agricultural use. The department uses these funds to purchase farm easements from landowners who score the highest in the state's competitive application system.

"Our program was originally created as a pilot, and each year we've enhanced it to better support Ohio's preservation needs," said Agriculture Director Robert Boggs. "Governor Strickland's Building Ohio Jobs proposal, a \$1.7 billion investment in Ohio's economy and infrastructure that will create tens of thousands of new jobs, includes a \$400-million bond renewal for the Clean Ohio Fund. If passed, this money will help to continue preserving the state's most valued natural resource for generations to come."

To apply for the program, farmers must work through a sponsoring organization like a local land trust, a Soil and Water Conservation District, or group of local officials. These sponsors fill out and submit applications on behalf of interested landowners, who are also required to be enrolled in a Current Agricultural Use Valuation, must be located in an agricultural district, and are willing to donate at least 25 percent of the easement's points-based appraised value.

Applicants can earn up to 150 points on the two-tiered application, based on several factors. Section one of the application focuses on development pressure, soils, proximity to protected properties, local development and preservation initiatives, and farm conservation plans. Section two includes narrative questions regarding the farm and its unique appeal to AEPP. Applicants also have the opportunity to earn three extra points if the land is located in a county that has not yet received AEPP funding.

"This year we've added an incentive for counties that have not yet participated in the program to reinforce our commitment to stimulate local preservation efforts," Boggs said. "We hope this will encourage local governments and organizations to look to the future and begin prioritizing the preservation of our valued farmland."

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Through the agricultural easement program, landowners agree to keep land in agricultural use and give up the right to develop the land. This is done through an agricultural easement, which is a voluntary, legal agreement that limits the use of land to only agricultural use. Landowners retain ownership and management of the land, and can sell or pass along their farm to others. However, the easement permanently remains with the land, prohibiting any future non-farm development.

Since the Clean Ohio AEPP began in 2002, the state has successfully preserved more than 23,600 acres (including several pending agreements from 2007) with roughly \$22 million. This is only part of the \$400-million Clean Ohio bond package passed by voters in 2000, which allocated money to farmland preservation, brownfield redevelopment, rails to trails, and the protection of open spaces. This is the last official round of Clean Ohio funding.

For more information on Clean Ohio, the AEPP, or for a copy of the 2008 application, visit the department's Web site at www.ohioagriculture.gov/farmland or contact the Office of Farmland Preservation at 614-728-6210.

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