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American Farmland Trust To Pursue Innovative Solution To Enhance Water Quality in Chesapeake Bay

Washington, DC—In order to meet the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem restoration goals, Bay states must address the problem of high nutrient levels, which impair local waterways, affect groundwater quality and cause a growing hypoxic zone in the Bay. Under terms of the Chesapeake Bay Agreement 2000, nitrogen must be reduced by 103 million pounds, with 60 percent of the decrease coming from agriculture.

“Achieving substantial nitrogen reductions presents serious challenges for farmers,” says Jim Baird, Mid-Atlantic States Director for American Farmland Trust (AFT). “It is not so much knowing what to do, since there are many “Best Management Practices (BMPs)” that farmers can and are already using to reduce nitrogen or restrict its movement into waterways. But, they often come with a high initial price tag or maintenance costs.”

Baird explains that producers may be reluctant to adopt other BMPs because of the potential for reductions in crop yields. Overcoming these barriers and getting larger numbers of farmers to adopt such practices is a challenge to achieving cleaner water in the Chesapeake Bay.

To meet this challenge, AFT has proposed a multi-state, field-scale demonstration of its innovative, cost effective, market-based approach, *the BMP Challenge for Enhanced Nutrient Management*. The *Enhanced BMP Challenge* is a risk management tool, modeled on performance guarantees, which covers potential economic losses when a farmer adopts a new management practice. This week, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service announced that AFT is the recipient of a competitive \$650,000 Conservation Innovation Grant to undertake the Enhanced BMP Challenge in Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia.

“The BMP guarantee program has been tested extensively since 1998 with over 50 farmers on 9,200 acres in seven Midwest and Mid-Atlantic states, to successfully reduce fertilizer use and practice conservation tillage on their farms,” according to Brian Brandt, farmer and agronomist who oversees AFT’s work on nutrient management. “Over the past two-years, corn producers in a Pennsylvania trial used the *BMP Challenge* to achieve deep reductions in nitrogen applications—at a rate 15 percent below University recommendations—but with consistent and cost effective results on 4,000 acres,” said Brandt.

By expanding the *Enhanced BMP Challenge* to 8,500 acres over in the three Bay states, AFT believes farmers will be able to reduce between 200,000 and 270,000 pounds of nitrogen from the watersheds, benefiting the Bay as a whole. Using these farmers’ experience as a platform, AFT will work to generate credits for nutrient trading programs. “This type of integrated approach is ideal—a program that works for production agriculture with environmental benefits, that will help states achieve their

environmental commitments, and provide a different income stream for producers in the form of nutrient trading credits,” says Baird.

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American Farmland Trust is a national nonprofit organization working with communities and individuals to protect the best land, plan for agriculture and keep the land healthy. As the leading advocate for farm and ranch land conservation, AFT has ensured that more than a million acres stays bountiful and productive. AFT's national office is located in Washington, DC. The phone number is 202-331-7300. For more information, visit www.farmland.org