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From Farm to Sea: Agriculture Working for Cleaner Water

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Abstract:

Water, as one of our nation's most precious resources and lifeblood of the farm, is an obvious resource for farmers to preserve and protect. Given the polluted nature of many of America's waterways; municipalities, local governments, and industries are working toward developing comprehensive plans to improve water quality. In parts of the country with the most alarming nutrient and contaminant rates farmers are working with a diverse range of interested parties to make steady strides towards healthier waterways. In these areas, farmers are key partners in assuring success.

As one of many contributors to the degradation of waterways, farmers are crucial players in planning for water quality improvement efforts. American Farmland Trust is leading the effort to connect farmers to existing water quality improvement efforts by encouraging farmers to tackle the challenge of improving some of the nation's most threatened watersheds' the Mississippi River and the Chesapeake Bay. AFT's work in areas such as the Sauk River Watershed in Minnesota and the Chesapeake Bay Watershed aims to make farmers a part of the solution to the water quality challenges facing the region. Brian Brandt, Director of American Farmland Trust's Agriculture Conservation Innovation Center, works on-the-ground with farmers to improve their conservation practices by utilizing the BMP Challenge program to increase adoption of Best Management Practices (BMPs) on the farm. Farmers contribute by limiting use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides on the farm and thus removing pollutants and nutrients from the waterways, often at half the cost or less than the price of improving the polluting factors of other industries.

In this presentation Brian will offer an overview of existing programs, such as the BMP Challenge, that are available for communities to achieve water quality improvement goals. Brian will explain how working with farmers to adopt Best Management Practices (BMPs) can lead to water improvement results by generating water quality credits tradable in an ecosystem services market.

Impact Statement:

In the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, outcomes of this project will address four broad areas. First, based on current results, participating farmers will reduce 200,000 to 270,000 pounds of nitrogen from the watershed over the three years of the project, benefiting subwatersheds and the Bay as a whole. Second, replicating the work on additional acres under different soil and climatic conditions in new states will expand the region's collective experience with enhanced nutrient management, reducing costs, targeting acres for greater nutrient reductions and a host of agronomic issues. Third, AFT will aggressively investigate alternative means of sustaining this program by integrating BMP Challenge with existing federal and state cost-share programs, and generating credits for the nutrient trading programs in the three states. At completion, the grant will enable states to roll out a proven, sustainable program to dramatically reduce nitrogen and help them to achieve their commitments under the Chesapeake 2000 agreement.

In the Sauk River Watershed in Minnesota, American Farmland Trust (AFT) is coordinating a project to position farmers in the watershed to improve the environmental management of their farms and, in doing

so, accrue credits that can be sold to industry as verified units of improved water quality. By giving farmers assistance in making environmental improvements as well as incentive to make these improvements (through our launching of private markets for water quality credits), our project will reduce phosphorus, nitrogen and fine sediments and improve hydrology in the selected watershed. In addition, as a result of improved management practices, farmers will sequester more carbon in their soils- improving both soil quality and helping mitigate climate change.

These multiple environmental benefits (or 'eco-services') will provide new income streams for farmers based on 'growing green'. This is the first test of a real water quality trading and eco-services market involving point source polluters and agriculture in the Midwest. Once we successfully establish this unique multiple credit market, we will use what we learn to create additional markets to serve other areas of Minnesota and the Upper Mississippi River basin.

Category: Agricultural BMPs

Type of Presentation: Oral Presentation