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Kick-off of New Collaboration to Improve Lake Erie Water Quality

Watershed based cooperative conservation to reduce nutrient and sediment runoff in Branch, Hillsdale, Jackson, Lenawee, Monroe, Washtenaw Counties

(Monroe, Michigan – April 3, 2008) – Today, a partnership of government agencies and a non-profit organization announced a joint-effort to improve wildlife habitat and water quality in southeast Michigan and Lake Erie. The collaboration will increase the implementation of conservation practices on privately-owned agricultural land in Michigan's Western Lake Erie Basin.

The partnership includes the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency, the Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA), numerous conservation districts, and the Environmental Defense Fund, a non-profit organization. The target area includes all or portions of Branch, Jackson, Hillsdale, Lenawee, Monroe and Washtenaw counties.

"The water quality and natural resource challenges in Michigan's Western Lake Erie Basin are very complex for farmers and communities," explained Don Koivisto, MDA Director. "This kind of innovative, ambitious, and collaborative effort is exactly what the region needs to make real progress on enhancing the water quality of this world-renowned resource."

Under the agreement signed today, the state and federal partners will provide funding to assist landowners in installing highly effective conservation practices on their land.

"This effort will help farmers implement advanced level practices that deliver real results for soil health and water quality," said Garry Lee, Michigan NRCS State Conservationist. "In these times of high energy prices and fertilizer costs, highly effective practices like precision nutrient management can be an important strategy for reducing nutrient inputs without sacrificing crop yields."

Financial assistance to landowners will come primarily from Michigan's Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

"This collaboration gives farmers the opportunity to combine key water quality improvement practices for working lands offered through EQIP with CREP practices that filter water running off farm fields, such as streamside buffers and wetland restorations," explained Nancy Dietz,

Michigan FSA State Executive Director. “This provides a more comprehensive, whole farm approach and is good news for farmers and water quality.”

Conservation districts will receive increased financial assistance to plan and implement the practices. They will also receive technical training and assistance from the NRCS and Michigan Department of Agriculture.

“This effort puts the emphasis where it should be, on increased federal, state and local partnering and on providing farmers with the conservation tools they need,” remarked Mike Lawless, President of the Michigan Association of Conservation Districts.

Through generous support from the Joyce Foundation, Environmental Defense Fund is helping to fund conservation district efforts within the project area.

“This partnership typifies the pioneering attitude towards conservation in Michigan and sets an example for the rest of the country,” said Suzy Friedman, Project Manager – Agriculture Projects for the Center for Conservation Incentives at Environmental Defense Fund.

For more information and photos, see <http://www.wleb.org>.