

Farm Management

PRESERVATION

PARTNERS: Neighboring farm owners Tom VonSeggern and Rod Kuntz have preserved key parts of their farms through the Clean Ohio Ag Easement Purchase Program. Their land is part of a 1,500-acre collection of preserved farmland in Fulton County.

Clean Ohio impacts Buckeye farms

By GAIL C. KECK

SINCE Ohio voters passed the first Clean Ohio program in 2000, the state has become a cleaner and greener place because of projects funded through the program. If voters pass a renewal on Nov. 4, that progress can continue, according to state officials backing the idea.

The Democratic Strickland administration, as well as the Republican leaders of the General Assembly, are backing the plan. So is the Ohio Farm Bureau, The Nature Conservancy and the Ohio Chapter of the National Brownfields Association. The diverse support for the issue reflects the variety of projects funded through Clean Ohio.

So far, Clean Ohio funding has paid for the cleanup of 173 abandoned, polluted industrial sites, called brownfields. It has also paid for the protection of 26,000 acres of natural areas, the preservation of 20,000 acres of farmland and helped establish 216 miles of recreational trails. Here's a look at how some of those projects are impacting farmers in the state.

Brownfield redevelopment Columbus landfill

While farmers might be more interested in the farmland preservation efforts funded through Clean Ohio, funding brownfield cleanup helps preserve farmland, too, notes Joe Reidy, an environmental lawyer and president of the Ohio Chapter of the National Brownfields Association.

"When sites get old and contaminated, they get left behind because the cost of redeveloping them is more expensive than to go out and pave over a cornfield," he explains.

Reidy points to the rede-

Key Points

- Passing State Issue 2 would continue Clean Ohio.
- Program has paid for farmland preservation.
- Strickland considers it key to economic development.

velopment of a closed landfill along the Olentangy River in Columbus as an example. After the site was cleaned up, Time Warner built a 160,000-square-foot office complex there. If the site had not been made available, it's likely that Time Warner would have built on farmland in Delaware or Union County, says Reidy. "That site would not have been redeveloped without the \$3 million from the state."

Redevelopment within cities also helps cities reclaim a tax base and use infrastructure resources more efficiently, Reidy adds. Such redevelopment projects also attract private investments that stimulate the state's economy.

Green space protection Forrest Woods project

The Forrest family in Paulding County had tried for years to find a way to preserve the old-growth forest on their farm,

recalls Clair Forrest Jr. Even though the Ohio Department of Natural Resources had worked with them to set up purchase plans, the deals always fell through when ODNR funds were diverted to other sites that were in immediate danger of development, he explains. "It wasn't working."

Clean Ohio's green space funding offered a solution. The family worked with the Black Swamp Conservancy to apply for Clean Ohio funding to purchase the property in several tracts over several years. Neighboring landowners also sold tracts, forming a nature preserve of nearly 200 acres that includes forests, meadows and streams.

While the Forrest Woods project involved a land sale, many of the Clean Ohio green space projects use the sale of conservation easements, protecting the land while leaving the land in the hands of private property owners. Either way, the program has given landowners a way to protect the land even if they can't afford to donate the entire value of the land, Forrest points out. For instance, landowners who are still paying on a mortgage can't sell or donate land or develop-

ment rights without first paying off the mortgage.

Farmland preservation VonSeggern easements

Compared to farmland easement purchase programs in other parts of the country, the Clean Ohio Agricultural Easement Purchase Program is the most cost effective, says Brian Williams, Ohio director for American Farmland Trust.

To qualify for the program, a local funding match of at least 25% is required, and many of the landowners are providing that funding match by donating as much 50% to 60% of the easement value, Williams says. "They're getting a fraction of the value for the easement, but they're still lining up to do it."

Competition to participate in the AEPP has been stiff, with 14 applications submitted for each easement sold. More Clean Ohio funding would help more of those applicants preserve their land, says Williams.

"I really think if this Clean Ohio passes in November, farmland preservation efforts in Ohio are poised to blossom." Land-use policy changes are needed, too, he adds.

Selling easements is not only helping participants protect their land, but it's also helping them strengthen or expand their farms, Williams notes. "The people doing it are not taking the money and retiring to Florida. They're reinvesting it."

Actually, a vacation to Florida is one of the factors that convinced Tom and Laurie VonSeggern of Fulton County to participate in the AEPP. Their flight down was so rough, they ended up driving back, Tom explains. That got them thinking about how they wanted to leave their land to their children. They decided they wanted to

pass it on as farmland. "As soon as I got back, I started working on it," Tom recalls.

The VonSeggern family has sold easements on 840 acres of land and neighboring farmer Rod Kuntz of Anward Farms has sold an easement on 200 acres. Other neighboring farmers have sold easements, as well, creating a chunk of about 1,500 acres of preserved farmland.

At least four more area landowners are hoping to sell additional easements. That sends a strong message to developers looking for building sites, Kuntz points out. While developments, such as a nearby steel plant, might be good for a community, developers don't always use good judgment in picking sites, he says. Establishing an area of preserved farmland encourages them to look elsewhere.

Another benefit of the AEPP is that it brings farmers together with nonfarmers interested in preserving farmland, adds Laurie VonSeggern. They worked with the Black Swamp Conservancy to apply for the program, and Tom now serves on the organization's board.

Trail development Rails to Trails

The Clean Ohio program has also helped make the outdoors more accessible by funding projects to develop recreational trails. The money from Clean Ohio can help trail organizers qualify for additional federal funds or Ohio Department of Transportation grants, notes Joan Simcak, trail director for the Holmes County Park District and executive director of the Holmes County Rails to Trails Coalition. She used Clean Ohio grants as matching funds to attract additional grants for the project.

Keck writes from Marysville.

The basics of Clean Ohio

THE Clean Ohio program will appear on the ballot as State Issue 2. If it passes, the state will sell \$400 million in state bonds to investors. The bond sale revenue will be used for brownfield cleanup, green space protection, trail development and farmland preservation.

The bonds will be repaid from existing state revenues. No new taxes are involved.

Local governments, public agencies and non-profit organizations are eligible to apply for program funding. Companies or individuals who cause pollution at a site are not eligible for cleanup funding and will still be held liable by the Ohio EPA.

■ For more on the issue, go to www.cleanohio.org.