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NW Ohio farmers eligible for \$220M to keep water clean

FROM BLADE STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

Farmers in 27 northwest Ohio counties are eligible for up to \$220 million in financial incentives aimed at keeping sediment out of the Maumee River and western Lake Erie, as well as the Portage, Sandusky, Huron, Vermilion, and Black River watersheds.

The incentives were announced yesterday by U.S. Department of Agriculture officials for the Lake Erie Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, known to some as Lake Erie's CREP. It is one of many programs with similar goals across the country.

Ohio's program, established in 2001, is a voluntary program that encourages farmers to install buffer strips and windbreaks, as well as enhance wetlands.

The incentives were announced at the Farm Science Review, a London, Ohio-based exposition of farm equipment and businesses that draws thousands of people.

There's a \$100-per-acre bonus for farmers who plant trees in the buffer strips; it allows farmers to plant buffer strips in parts of their fields subject to erosion, not just along streams and ditches. Farmers also get an incentive to get their neighbors to sign up for the program.

"The changes announced today will offer farmers more choices and better incentives," said Todd Hesterman of the private Conservation Action Project. "Farmers will be able to choose practical conservation

measures that fit on their farms, and they will receive significantly higher payments in many cases."

Sediment that runs off farms in northwest Ohio often ends up in the Maumee River and accumulates in the Toledo shipping channel. The channel is the most heavily dredged one in the Great Lakes, usually costing \$5 million a year or more to keep clear of excess silt.

Farmers will be able to begin enrolling in the enhanced program in late October. The 27 counties eligible to participate are Allen, Ashland, Auglaize, Crawford, Defiance, Erie, Fulton, Hancock, Hardin, Henry, Huron, Lucas, Lorain, Marion, Medina, Mercer, Ottawa, Paulding, Putnam, Richland, Sandusky, Seneca, Shelby, Van Wert, Williams, Wood, and Wyandot.

Larry Antosch, Ohio Farm Bureau Federation environmental policy director, said the enhanced program "will help the region to make real progress towards protecting and restoring water quality in the Maumee River and ultimately Lake Erie."

The Maumee is Lake Erie's biggest tributary and one of the largest in the Great Lakes region.

One of the biggest issues facing Lake Erie has been the gradual increase in phosphorus the last 10 years. Phosphorus is a farm nutrient and component of human waste. Too much of it causes an abundance of algae, scientists have said.