

**For Immediate Release Issued Jointly by:
The Leelanau Conservation District
The Leelanau Conservancy
MSU Extension – Leelanau County
NW Michigan Horticultural Research Station**

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FarmAbility II Application Round Beginning April 2, 2012

When Buzz Long and Tom Nelson arrived at the offices of the Leelanau Conservation District in Lake Leelanau on an early Monday morning after an early March snowstorm in 2009, they weren't sure what to expect. "I remember standing there with Buzz and a cup of coffee, staring at all that snow outside and wondering if anyone would show up," said Nelson, Director of Farm Programs at the Leelanau Conservancy. But show up they did.

It was a first in the U.S.—a privately-funded program called FarmAbility that pays farm families annually to conserve their farms for ten years and provides cost-sharing for agricultural workshops, seminars and estate planning to help transition the farm into the hands of the next generation of growers.

"We had talked with quite a few folks out there beforehand and figured FarmAbility would be a 'no-brainer' for area growers," Long said. "But we weren't entirely sure just how people would respond that day, especially after the storm." It turned out there was no need for concern: the response was tremendous. Within 60 days, the 5,000-acre goal was reached with nearly 30 families signing up.

Now, they're doing it again.

On April 2nd, four partnering organizations, the Leelanau Conservancy, Leelanau Conservation District, MSU Extension and the NW Michigan Horticultural Research Center are offering a second application round for Leelanau's FarmAbility Program. Private dollars, including a grant from Rotary Charities of Traverse City, pays for 100% the necessary funding.

The program has certainly been popular. In just the first three years, enrollees owning nearly 1,000 acres have chosen to permanently conserve their farms through the Leelanau Conservancy. Not only that, the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, the Grand Traverse Conservation District and others are slated to offer FarmAbility in several strong agricultural townships in Grand Traverse and Antrim Counties later this year. "Based on how well folks took to the program three years ago, FarmAbility applications may fill up even faster this time around," said Nelson.

"We couldn't be more excited about a second round of applications for such a ground-breaking conservation program," said Dr. Nikki Rothwell of the M.S.U. Horticultural Research Center. "We have seen tremendous benefit from participating growers, particularly with our young farmers through FarmAbility's support of the New FARM Program. We look forward to partnering again with the Leelanau Conservancy and Leelanau Conservation District and welcome the addition of the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy to continue to find creative ways to preserve the agricultural heritage of northwest Michigan."

FarmAbility is a voluntary program. Its incentives include annual cash payments of \$10 per-acre for active agricultural land, \$5 per-acre for non-ag land, in addition to the cost-sharing benefits. The current application round features a new benefit which can help defray the cost of the USDA's GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) Audits. The program will match up \$500 per enrolled family for GAP.

Overall, FarmAbility is patterned after the State of Michigan's P.A. 116 program, but is more farmer-friendly. Any eligible farm family may apply for a farm conservation agreement which maintains their farm in active agriculture for

a 10-year period. Unlike Michigan's P.A. 116 program, payments are not tied to household income or property tax rates, and there is no financial penalty levied if the family does not re-enroll at the end of the 10-year term. Eligible farm families already enrolled in the P.A. 116 program are welcome to enroll in the FarmAbility Program.

Eligible Leelanau County applicants will be considered on a "first-come-first-served" basis until 5,000 acres are enrolled. Those interested in applying can do so in person at the offices of the Leelanau Conservation District at 112 W. Philip Street in Lake Leelanau from 9am to 3pm beginning April 2nd. Thereafter, drop-in hours will be from 10:00 am to 12:30 pm on Mondays and Wednesdays at the Conservation District Offices and from 1:30 pm to 4:00 pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays at the offices of the Leelanau Conservancy at 105 N. First Street in Leland. Drop-in hours will continue until 5,000 acres are enrolled in the program. Eligibility rules can be found at www.leelanauconservancy.org, by calling Tom Nelson at 256-9665, or stopping at the Leelanau Conservation District or Leelanau Conservancy offices.

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