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Chesapeake Fields gains rural business grant

By Cooky McClung, Kent County News Staff Writer

CHESTERTOWN – Bringing Chesapeake Fields Institute “halfway home” in its half-million dollar funding quest, Congressman Wayne T. Gilchrest (R-1st-MD) brought the organization \$30,000 closer to the goal July 3 when he presented a check from the USDA Rural Development state director.

The RDS funding makes grants to finance and facilitate development of small and emerging private business enterprises in rural communities and towns of 25,000 and smaller.

Chesapeake Fields is researching niche markets for farmers to supply with local grain and corn crops.

“Chesapeake Fields has the potential to reach a huge megalopolis, with their location just an overnight drive from a third of the consumers in the country,” said Gilchrest, as he handed the check to Chesapeake Fields board president John Hall.

Committed to “keeping farmers farming,” Chesapeake Fields Institute is on a mission to strengthen the profitability of traditional agricultural markets for family farmers in Kent and, eventually, up and down the Eastern seaboard.

“Six out of the last nine years, farmers here have had a negative cash flow,” Hall said. “Farming has become a weekend sport, with wives and sons and daughters having to work at outside jobs to support the family.”

The negative cash flow and low commodity prices which caused 40 percent of the farmers across the country to leave agriculture over the past few decades has affected Kent seriously enough to prompt Hall, who is also director of the Kent Cooperative Extension Service, and an active board of CFI directors to work hard on the innovative project they hope will encourage economic development in a manner that enhances the rural and agricultural heritage of the Eastern Shore.

“Right now, Delmarva farmers have one buyer,” said Hall, “and that’s the poultry business. That has to change.”

After a year-long study, Chesapeake Fields formed, with the board hiring a Midwestern consultant who had successfully helped create farming co-operatives in other states. They immediately began to explore the best way to convince farmers to grow food, not feed.

And over the 12 months, the board of directors, that included farmers, professionals and businessmen, forged ahead to find workable solutions to keep farmers in business, not only in Kent, but along the Eastern Shore.

“From the birth of CFI, there’ve been a lot of very talented, capable people who helped us develop a model for our research and development,” said Hall.

He noted one of their major goals is to identify niche markets, such as specialty breads, pasta and organic products.

“This concept is perfect right now, because it addresses food safety, which, with terrorism currently in the spotlight, is one of the biggest concerns in our country. A successful infiltration of one of the huge food processors could infect an enormous number of the population with bio-terrorism in a very few days,” explained Hall.

“Niche markets are identity preserved, because you must be able to trace the product back to the seed stock. You also know what nutrients and pesticides have been used on the crops,” he said, “and you have labels that contain all this information.

“However, this process requires segregated storage,” Hall added, “because you can’t just dump your corn or grain in with those that haven’t been identified.”

The \$30,000 awarded to CFI by USDA Rural Development will be used by the institute primarily to research new markets and opportunities for sustaining agriculture on the Delmarva Peninsula.

“Our research model is a nine-step process that will cost a half a million dollars, and with this check, it’s pretty exciting to realize we’re just about halfway there,” said Eric Johnson, director and grants administrator of CFI.

To date, CFI has conducted a preliminary market study that has identified eight new food-related businesses that will help create approximately 100 jobs.

In addition to exploring niche markets that encourage farmers to grow food crops, CFI is focusing on re-connecting people with the land.

“If we want the next generation to remain in agriculture, and if we want to preserve the quality of life in our area, we have to make sure that farming is a profitable business,” warned Mike Waal, a CFI board member and former economic development director for Kent.

“Our citizens no longer even relate agriculture with economic development. Far too many people have lost the connection with open space,” said Hall, “which is why we feel education is a vital part of the institute,” he explained.

“We hope to create a center where research can be conducted on everything from pest problems to disease resistance to the baking quality of grains,” said Hall.

In addition to a market research staff that includes people from Pennsylvania, North Dakota and Maryland, CFI is using grant funds to conduct tests on food in labs at the University of Maryland.

“We’re growing two kinds of tofu beans and one local variety,” said Hall. “The Japanese have already shown an interest in the local bean.”

Although CFI plans to include an educational and research center within its blueprint, Hall reminded the group who attended the check- passing ceremony that the institute was still “all about farmers.”

“Value-added means moving up the processing chain from crops in the field to a product out of the plant,” he said. “It means creating profit for farmers. We want to include an ag business park next to our educational center, but we want it to be run by farmers. Chesapeake Fields will be a community-owned company, but we also have to remember to ‘think beyond the farm gate,’” Hall said.

“And we have to let people know that pavement isn’t progress.”

While CFI began as an Upper Shore product, Hall and the institute’s board of directors now visualize it including the Delmarva Peninsula and beyond.

“The markets are here,” said Gilcrest, praising CFI for buttressing his conservation corridor, incorporated into the recently passed Farm Bill. “If you come up with the right plan, there’s no question that CFI will be successful.”

LEAD Maryland seeks future agriculture leaders

Susan Harrison, Executive Director, LEAD Maryland

ANNAPOLIS, MD (April 30, 2002) – LEAD Maryland, a nonprofit organization dedicated to developing leadership for agriculture and rural communities, is accepting applications for its third class which begins in February 2003. The application deadline for LEAD Maryland fellowships is October 1, 2002. Finalists will be interviewed and a class of up to 25 fellows will be named by the end of 2002.

“LEAD Maryland is one of the most valuable programs I know of for developing the next generation of rural leaders,” says Bradley H. Powers, deputy secretary of the Maryland Department of Agriculture and LEAD Maryland board member. “In addition to learning from nationally and internationally-recognized experts, each fellow brings experiences and perspectives to the class that enhance the strength and breadth of the program.”

Farmers, government managers, and representatives of private companies and nonprofit organizations all benefit from enrolling in the two-year program. Besides a series of eight three-day seminars, fellow participate in a study tour to Washington, D.C. and to an international location to help the leaders-in-training compare and contrast political, economic, social and cultural issues. Class I traveled to Belgium and the Netherlands and Class II plans to travel to Cuba in January.

Candace Lohr, a member of Class II whose family owns and operates a fruit and vegetable operation in Harford County signed up for the program because it seemed to be a great opportunity to meet more people in production agriculture and to expand on her agriculture knowledge. "I am working with 22 other great people involved in agriculture," she said. "It's given me a more rounded look on agriculture."

The LEAD acronym stands for Leadership, Education, Action and Development - all qualities that are taught in the class. Successful candidates will have demonstrated emerging leadership abilities as well as a genuine interest in agricultural and societal issues. Fellows learn through lecture, discussion, self-assessment, group activities and by completing a leadership project. Graduates go on to serve their industry, community, organizations and to serve through public office.

The five founding organizations are the Maryland Department of Agriculture, Maryland Farm Bureau, Maryland Agricultural Education Foundation, Maryland Grain Producers Utilization Board, and the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension. For further information about the program, contact Susan Harrison, executive director of LEAD Maryland, at 410-827-8056 x136 or sh194@umail.umd.edu.

Conservation Buyer Program

Conservancy announces latest land protection tool

Jennifer Nutt, ESLC

Eastern Shore Land Conservancy (ESLC) has recently established a Conservation Buyer Program (CBP). This program is their latest land protection tool available to sellers and buyers of land who are interested in forever protecting property from development. The program connects sellers of land with potential buyers who are willing to utilize a conservation easement or other appropriate land protection option to protect farmland and habitat.

The CBP operates a database of available properties and potential buyers. ESLC maintains and updates this database and uses it to match potential buyers with available properties. The program targets priority conservation lands including farms threatened by development, threatened habitat areas, and properties adjacent to already protected properties.

No commission is taken by ESLC, although ESLC staff may solicit donations from people that have actively participated in this program. If no conservation easement or other land protection measure exists on the available property, ESLC requires the buyer to sign a letter of intent that the property will be permanently protected within three years of purchase. Permanent protection includes a donated conservation easement, easements sold to the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF), Rural Legacy or other methods approved by ESLC.

If you are interested in becoming a Conservation Buyer, or have a property you would like them to list, please contact Jennifer Nutt at 410/827-9756 ext 155 or jnutt@eslc.org.

CHESAPEAKE FIELDS UPDATE

By Eric Johnson, CFI Director

Evaluation is a requirement for any organization's success. Here at Chesapeake Fields Institute, we believe both qualitative and quantitative evaluation should be incorporated into every level of operation—from assessing pre-planning stages of projects to measuring the long-term impact of our efforts.

As part of our commitment to ongoing evaluation, we are proposing to administer short surveys with each newsletter. You will notice that a postage-paid survey card has been enclosed with this newsletter. We ask that you take just a moment to complete this short survey and stick it in the mail to us. We appreciate your continued support and your willingness to help us gauge the opinions of our readership.

SARE announces Partnership Grants for agricultural professionals Helen Husher, Northeast SARE Publications and Public Information

The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program (SARE) has initiated a new grant program for Cooperative Extension and other agricultural professionals who work directly with farmers. The Partnership Grant program supports on-farm research and demonstration projects, and can be used to pay for materials, sampling, supplies, labor, and to compensate the cooperating farmers and professional staff for their time.

The purpose of the Partnership Grant is to build knowledge farmers can use, to encourage the widespread use of sustainable agriculture techniques, and to strengthen partnerships among farmers, extension, NRCS, and other farming professionals. The Partnership Grant application is short and straightforward, and the SARE contribution to the project cannot exceed \$10,000.

Partnership projects can address a variety of topics such as the development of beneficial insect habitat, alternative crops or animals, practices that make use of biological cycles for improved soil, plant, and pest management, marketing, adding value, grazing, tool or technology development, agroforestry, farm management, and water quality. Proposals should be relevant to farming and sustainability issues in the northeast region, and should offer research and outreach components so that results will be available to the wider farm community.

To apply, you should be engaged in agricultural research or outreach in an organization such as Cooperative Extension, NRCS, a state department of agriculture, a college or university, or a nonprofit that operates within the Northeast SARE region. The region is made up of Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C.

If you would like to look at a Partnership Grant application, call the Northeast SARE office at 802-656-0471, send e-mail to nesare@zoo.uvm.edu, or download an application from the Northeast SARE web site at www.uvm.edu/~nesare. Applications should be postmarked by 12-02-02 for 2003 funds.

Farmers' Market Nutrition Program to continue Connie Ruohomaki, FMNP Program Manager, MD Dept. of Ag.

ANNAPOLIS—Despite the tumultuous resolution of the recent Farm Bill negotiations, Maryland is continuing with its 2002 Farmers' Market Nutrition Program by authorizing ten new markets to redeem WIC and Senior Nutrition Program coupons and by extending the redemption date from June through October 31.

Authorized Farmers' Markets in all 23 Maryland Counties will be able to redeem the Nutrition Program coupons beginning June 1, reports FMNP Program Manager Connie Ruohomaki. She said that 10,236 coupon books valued at \$15 per book will be distributed to residents 65 years of age and older through the Department of Aging Senior Center locations within each county. Another 18,000 coupon books valued at \$20 each will be distributed to participants in the Women, Infant and Children programs throughout the state.

The total redemption value of the Senior coupon program is \$153,581 and the total redemption value of the WIC coupon program is \$180,241, payable to participating farmers who exchange locally-grown fruits and vegetables for the coupons which are later redeemed for payment by check. Last year more than 400 Maryland farmers participated in the FMNP and received a total of \$448,412.

Ms Ruohomaki hopes to expand the Maryland FMNP's Transportation Initiative by assisting local communities and Farmers' Market locations in procuring bus or train card outreach such as was done on Baltimore buses last season. Through an in-kind matching fund arrangement, the Maryland Department of Agriculture was able to place information cards that described market locations on Baltimore buses. One market reported that the placement of the cards increased its coupon participation by 25%.

Communities seeking to learn more about the Farmers' Market Transportation Initiative, "Ride the bus to a Farmers' Market," may call Connie Ruohomaki at 410-841-5774, or email her at: ruohomCK@mda.state.md.us