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Media Contact: Gail Philbin
312-493-2384, gail.philbin@sierraclub.org

Taxpayer Subsidies Reward Polluters, Promote Industrial Mega-Farms

New Sustainable Agriculture Coalition Calls for Reforms of Funding Priorities for Michigan Farm Subsidies

Lansing, Mich.—Taxpayers are providing millions of dollars in government subsidies to industrial mega-farms in Michigan under policies that unfairly favor corporate agricultural giants while ignoring massive pollution and health risks, and undermining safe, sustainable farms that are growing in consumer popularity, according to a report released today by a new sustainable agriculture coalition.

Restoring the Balance to Michigan's Farming Landscape, a report issued by *Less=More*, a new coalition supporting sustainable farming in Michigan, offers a window into the bias of one specific federal Farm Bill program, the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). Since 1995, under this program Michigan factory farms (also known as Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations or CAFOs), have raked in millions of dollars of tax subsidies that are inaccessible to sustainable and organic livestock operations. This inequity keeps prices for factory farm products artificially low compared to healthier, locally grown meat, dairy and egg products, and increases threats to health and the environment by encouraging more massive, concentrated livestock facilities.

“Families and businesses that support local, sustainably grown foods deserve to know that millions of dollars of our federal taxes are supporting polluting factory farms here in Michigan,” said **Anne Woiwode, Sierra Club Michigan Chapter director**. “That hurts our environment, the public’s health and Michigan farmers who work hard to provide us with clean, healthy food,”

Most CAFOs look and operate more like a factory than a farm, confining livestock in warehouses often for their entire lives or in crowded, open feedlots with no vegetation. These mega “farms” receive substantial taxpayer subsidies even when poor disposal practices of the millions of gallons of chemical- and contaminant-filled wastes they generate lead to pollution of water, land and air, and violations of state and federal environmental laws.

“This lopsided support happens at a time when many independent, environmentally responsible farmers whose practices don’t pollute are struggling to make ends meet,” said **Sandy Nordmark, vice president of the Michigan Farmers Union**. “It’s also taking place at a time when Michigan consumers want more products from sustainable farmers, not less. Direct sales at farmers markets, local stores, restaurants and through community supported agriculture are one of the fastest growing sectors of the agricultural community.”

According to **Restoring the Balance**, 37 Michigan factory farms cited for environmental violations and unpermitted discharges over the 15 years ending in 2011 were awarded nearly \$27 million in Farm Bill subsidies between 1995 and 2011. Of these operations, 26 jointly racked up fines and penalties of more than \$1.3 million for their share of these violations.

Under the Michigan EQIP program, administered by the USDA’s Natural Resource Conservation Service Michigan office, dramatic disparities in funding exist between practices used exclusively by CAFOs, such as waste lagoons, and those used by sustainable livestock operations to achieve similar goals. The report also documents environmental problems and threats posed by factory farm practices and structures funded by EQIP, and provides case studies with real world examples of the problems.

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“Michiganders should know that something can be done to fix this uneven playing field. Less support to factory farms means a more sustainable, greener Michigan,” said Sierra Club’s Woiwode. “We invite supporters of sustainable and organic, locally grown foods to join the *Less=More Coalition* to help bring that change about.”

Restoring the Balance explains that the State Conservationist of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Michigan, with advice from a state Technical Committee, has the needed authority to correct the system that puts farmers devoted to sustainable rearing of animals at a disadvantage while rewarding polluting industrial operations that harm the environment and threaten public health.

In a meeting with NRCS State Conservationist Garry Lee on Feb. 14, the *Less=More Coalition* presented its finding and urged him to take action. The coalition recommendations include:

- Require CAFO applicants to list all citations for any environmental or health-related law violation;
- Require CAFO applicants to document compliance with state and federal environmental laws, including keeping up-to-date records and Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans, which guide handling of animal waste;
- Institute accountability into the system through:
 - Requiring an independent verification of whether or not operators complete work as funded;
 - Withhold funds until all prior subsidized work is documented;
 - Require testing of the effectiveness of practices, both in general and at specific sites, with independent scientific committee to review and approve practices authorized for subsidies;
 - Eliminate practices from EQIP funding that do not provide environmental benefits.
- Restructure the ranking system to invest the majority of EQIP funds into practices designed to achieve program’s environmental objectives, including fully funding planning based on practices for traditional sustainable livestock and certified organic livestock farms just as factory farm Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans are funded;
- Provide training to District and County Conservationists in sustainable practices so they can objectively assess proposed projects;
- Make it a priority for local and district conservationists to reach out to sustainable farmers in their region and educate them about the funding opportunities available through EQIP, and
- Streamline paperwork for organic farmers applying for EQIP by allowing use of some of their organic certification documentation in EQIP application.

An abstract of **Restoring the Balance** is attached and the full report is available at:

www.MoreforMichigan.org. For questions, contact Sandy Nordmark, Michigan Farmers Union, 269-979-3968; and Anne Woiwode, Sierra Club, anne.woiwode@sierraclub.org or 517-484-2372.

The *Less=More Coalition* is a group of organizations engaged in various aspects of our food system who seek to level the playing field for sustainable farmers in Michigan. They include: Beery Farms of Michigan, LLC, the Center for Food Safety, Crane Dance Farm, LLC, Environmentally Concerned Citizens of South Central Michigan, Food & Water Watch, Greater Grand Rapids Food Systems Council, Groundswell Farm, Zeeland, Humane Society of the United States, Michigan Farmers Union, Michigan Voices for Good Food Policy, Michigan Young Farmers Coalition, Sierra Club Michigan Chapter and Socially Responsible Agricultural Project.

Less support for polluting factory farms means a **more** sustainable Michigan. For more information, visit, www.MoreforMichigan.org.

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