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Diverse Group Releases First-of-its-Kind Report Measuring Agriculture Sustainability
Findings show crop production reducing environmental footprint

SAN ANTONIO [Jan. 12, 2009] – A first-of-its-kind report released today creates a framework for measuring agriculture sustainability. Developed to inform long-term continuous improvements in agriculture production, the initial findings indicate crop production is already making progress toward reducing its environmental footprint. The Environmental Resource Indicators report was released at the American Farm Bureau Federation annual meeting by *Field to Market, the Keystone Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture*.

Field to Market is a diverse alliance representing the many links in the food chain, including grower organizations, agribusinesses, food companies and conservation organizations. The Alliance views the report as the first step in a long-term effort to quantify and improve the environmental, socio-economic and health impacts of agriculture production. The report evaluated national-scale metrics over the past two decades for land use, water use, energy use, soil loss, and climate impact in corn, soy, cotton and wheat production. In 2007, these crops comprised nearly 70 percent of the 305 million acres of U.S. cropland.

“Several trends are emerging. Importantly, production agriculture has become increasingly efficient, relying on fewer inputs to produce more. However, we recognize there are significant challenges ahead in meeting increased global demand in a sustainable manner,” says Michael Reuter, director of conservation programs for the Central US Region of The Nature Conservancy. “These metrics will be expanded to define other attributes of sustainable agricultural production and lay the foundation for studies that will analyze additional environmental, socio-economic, and health factors.”

Progress has been made. The initial index shows that soil-loss efficiency trends have improved substantially by 30 to nearly 70 percent for the four crops evaluated. Energy use per unit of output is down in corn, soybean, and cotton production by nearly 40 to more than 60 percent. Irrigated water use per unit of output has also decreased 20 percent to nearly 50 percent while carbon emissions per unit of output have dropped by about a third for these three crops. The results are intended to provide meaningful and credible information to shape knowledge-based decisions and allow tracking of trends over time. A next-generation report will assess water quality and biodiversity indicators.

These improvements are especially important when put into the context of global needs for food and fiber. Experts predict demand for agricultural goods will double by 2050 as global population increases by an additional 3 billion people. Agriculture is already the predominant user of all habitable

land and 70 percent of fresh water. By 2030 grain-producing land per capita will drop to just a third of what it was in 1950, while the World Water Council predicts in just a decade we will need 17 percent more water than is available to feed the world. The industry is working diligently on collaborative solutions to meet these challenges.

“Increased productivity and improved natural resource management will be vitally important as we seek to feed, fuel and clothe our growing world population on the same amount or even less land in the decades ahead,” says Kevin Rogers, cotton grower from Arizona. “The best opportunity to achieve this goal is for all groups in the chain to work collaboratively. Participation from farmers and the conservation organizations is vitally important to success.”

In addition to the findings, the report is significant for its direction toward creating a comprehensive methodology that can become the standard for measuring agriculture sustainability. *Field to Market* conducted a broad-based peer-review process that included 17 experts from universities, government and other institutions to help enhance the methodology..

“The peer-review process allowed us to add many different and fresh perspectives to the body of work, allowing for a very objective product,” says Marty Matlock, area director of the Center for Agricultural and Rural Sustainability at the University of Arkansas, who incorporated peer-review comments. “The most valuable aspect of the group’s work has been bringing together very diverse interests and creating mutual understanding and acceptance of one another’s concerns.”

Most notably, *Field to Market* seeks to work with farmers to identify and create best practices that can drive future improvements. The Alliance is beginning an industry-wide dialogue that will lead to programs for continued improvement of economically and environmentally friendly food and fiber production. The group is also creating an online calculator to help individual growers assess the efficiency of their operations, along with cataloging advice from experts and other growers that will help advance future sustainability efforts.

“Increasingly we’re hearing from our consumers who want to make sustainable food and fiber choices,” says John Wolf, vice president of ingredients, commodities and risk management at Kellogg Company. “It’s important consumers understand the progress already being made while recognizing that bringing the entire supply chain together is critical to continue making advances from the farm fields to the supermarket shelves.”

Field to Market is just beginning its efforts to develop and improve sustainability metrics and create practices to promote continuous improvement throughout the agriculture food chain. The group is currently finalizing water quality and biodiversity indicators and expects to issue a next-generation report that assesses these in mid-2009. Future reports will consider additional environmental impacts as well as socio-economic and health factors.

An executive summary and full report can be accessed at http://keystone.org/spp/env-sustain_ag.html.

Field to Market, the Keystone Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture, defines agricultural sustainability as meeting the needs of the present while improving the ability to feed future generations by focusing on increasing ag productivity while decreasing environmental impact, improving human health through access to safe, nutritious food and improving social and economic well-being of rural communities. The Alliance is facilitated by the Keystone Center, a neutral, non-profit organization specializing in collaborative decision-making processes for environment, energy, and health policy issues.

Field to Market members include: *American Farm Bureau Federation; American Soybean Association; Bayer CropScience; Bunge; Cargill, Incorporated; ConAgra Foods; Conservation International; Cotton Incorporated; DuPont; Fleishman-Hillard; General Mills, Inc.; Grocery Manufacturers Association; John Deere; Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences; Mars, Incorporated; Monsanto Company; National Association of Conservation Districts; National Association of Wheat Growers; National Corn Growers Association; National Cotton Council of America; National Potato Council; Syngenta; The Coca-Cola Company; The Fertilizer Institute; Kellogg Company; The Nature Conservancy; United Soybean Board; and World Wildlife Fund.*

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