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**CONGRESSWOMAN JOHNSON DELIVERS USDA GRANT CHECK TO THE
LITCHFIELD COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT**

East Canaan, CT - The Litchfield County Conservation District received a check for a \$33,000 Rural Business Enterprise Grant (RBEG) today at the Freund Farm in East Canaan. Congresswoman Nancy Johnson and USDA Rural Development State Director, David Tuttle presented the federal grant on behalf of President Bush and Secretary of Agriculture, Ann Veneman. The funds will be used by the Conservation District to provide the Canaan Valley Agricultural Coop with the financial resources to conduct an engineering study. The study aims to aid in the coops' efforts to determine alternative uses for excess animal waste generated by farms in the Housatonic River Valley and thereby reduce pollution to area water sources.

Several years ago The Canaan Valley Agricultural Coop, established by seven Canaan Valley dairy farmers including the Freund family of East Canaan, constructed a "manure digester" on the Freund's farm that collects and burns methane and carbon dioxide - two greenhouse gases. The energy generated is used to keep the digester at body temperature. The excess heat is sufficient to heat the farm house and offices and provides all of the hot water on the farm. After the manure is digested a screw press separates the solid waste from the liquid waste. The liquid waste, rich with nutrients, is injected into soil while the solid waste is composted and sold off of the farm.

With previous financial assistance provided through USDA Rural Development and the Litchfield County Conservation District, the Canaan Valley Agricultural Coop conducted a feasibility study to determine whether the manure could be converted into planting pots that can be used by gardeners and nurseries. The study found that the venture was indeed feasible. The current \$33,000 RBEG covers the cost of an engineering study that will provide the coop with a cost estimate for producing the pots. It is expected that as a result of the engineering study, additional uses for the excess manure will also become apparent. Those alternative uses are likely to include, but are not limited to, the production of weed control film, pre-seeded starting strips, mats for direct planting, and root enhancing pot liners.

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“The programs that Rural Development offers have kept this project moving ahead,” said Ben Freund. “In a climate of increased environmental concern, with no real solutions for how to change the imbalance of phosphorus imported into farming operations, our project goes to the next step by decreasing the phosphorus load applied to our soils and enriching consumer products with nutrients that their gardens need.”

“This is a big win for the Freund Farm project,” Congresswoman Johnson said. “I believe this program will have broad benefits to the farmers of the Northwest corner. It will help every farmer that is struggling with sustainability, especially those faced with waste disposal difficulties. This solution offers a means of transforming a major expense into a net environmental gain and profit.”

Litchfield County Conservation District Manager, Jean Cronauer said, “The 3000 Conservation Districts nationwide have a long history of working in partnership with farming communities. We, at LCCD, are very proud to support the ingenuity and innovation of the Canaan Valley COOP farmers to sustain local agriculture and to protect water quality here in the Blackberry Watershed.”

“This project is a great idea. I’m glad that we’re able to be involved with it” said USDA Rural Development State Director, David Tuttle. “The potential environmental benefits of this endeavor are truly significant, not to mention the fact that this will transform manure management into a source of profit for farmers rather than an expense.”

USDA Rural Development serves as the lead federal entity for rural development needs and administers financial and technical assistance through three agencies: Rural Housing Service, Rural Business-Cooperative Service and Rural Utilities Service.

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