The Paddys Run Conservation Project (PRCP) provides funding to purchase development rights through agriculture and conservation easements from landowners in the Fernald area. The easements help protect water quality in the Paddys Run watershed and the Great Miami Aquifer. These large areas of undeveloped land also act as nature’s sponges to protect against flooding. The program helps to keep land in private hands while protecting working farms and the environment.

The first easement was signed in November 2012. Since then more than 4600 acres from willing landowners are now permanently protected with PRCP easements or fee simple purchases. An additional 85 acres are in process and funding is limited.

Opportunities and Challenges
The PRCP officially launched late in 2010. Nearly 4,700 acres are now either under consideration or have already received a conservation easement using Fernald settlement funds. As partial compensation for damages to the aquifer from Department of Energy's Fernald facility, Ohio received $13 million. A portion of this money is being used to purchase conservation easements in the area. Three Valley Conservation Trust (Three Valley) has partnered with Fernald’s Natural Resource Trustees to help acquire and hold the conservation easements. Partners have worked with MetroParks of Butler County and Great Parks of Hamilton County to acquire more than 300 acres of public lands.

Extensive documentation and review are required for these real estate transactions. The partners spend considerable time working with landowners to develop applications and address their concerns. For some properties, multiple mortgages, complex ownership issues and family dynamics have delayed closings. Project managers continuously track the progress of nearly 20 separate components necessary to finalize each easement.

Stretching Settlement Funds
Matching funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program allowed the Fernald settlement funds to go further. Nearly $7 million in additional funds have been leveraged so far. Easement protected land that is in the focus area receives a higher percentage of funding than properties that are in the expanded boundary. Conservation easement opportunities will continue to be explored until Natural Resources Damages settlement funds are spent.

Contact
For more information, contact Tom Schneider at thomas.schneider@epa.ohio.gov or (937) 285-6466