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**FIRST FARMERS AGRICULTURAL FORUM GATHERS  
AG LEADERS FROM ACROSS TENNESSEE TO DISCUSS THE STATE OF FARMING**

*Meeting celebrates significant impact farming is making on the lives of Tennesseans*

**COLUMBIA, Tenn. (September 20, 2011)** – With new technology and innovative processes driving greater and greater yields, farming in Tennessee is having a positive impact on both the state’s economy and the quality of life of its people, representatives from throughout Tennessee’s farming industry agreed on Monday in a round-table hosted by First Farmers & Merchants Bank.

The gathering, at the bank’s Columbia, Tennessee headquarters, and held in the middle of the year’s harvest, brought together envoys from state government, banking, private and public business, ag education and ag research and farmers, all of whom voiced their perspective on the current state of one of Tennessee top industries with an estimated total economic impact of \$78 billion annually.

In addition to a number of working farmers, the group included State of Tennessee Commissioner of Agriculture Julius Johnson, the new Chancellor of the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture Dr. Larry Arrington, UT President Dr. Joe DiPietro, as well as officials from the Tennessee Farm Bureau Federation, Tennessee Farmers Co-op, the Lawrence County and Maury County Co-ops, Tennessee Livestock Producers, Tractor Supply, Bryan Grain, TriGreen Equipment, Maury County, Maury Alliance and First Farmers & Merchants Bank.

Attendees confirmed that while there are still challenges that must be addressed, the state of farming in both Middle Tennessee and the state as a whole continues to be strong.

“The impact that farming has on the daily lives of Tennesseans is sometimes overlooked,” said T. Randy Stevens, chairman and CEO of First Farmers and Merchants Bank. “With new innovations driving the industry’s recent successes, we thought it appropriate to celebrate Tennessee farming and collaborate

about how we all could ensure it remains a viable industry for the sake of our state and nation. I'm also hopeful the discussion will encourage new relationships, provide a forum for discussing farmers' concerns and challenge us to work together to address any hindrances to a better future."

State Commissioner of Agriculture Julius Johnson agreed.

"I believe the demand for Tennessee farm products over the next ten years will be great," he said after discussing a number of ag-related projects from throughout the state, including biofuels, agritourism, agribusiness trade and the state's highly successful Tennessee Agriculture Enhancement Program, which provides cost sharing funds for long-term investments by farmers in livestock and farming operations.

Several participants emphasized the importance of smaller farms in Tennessee's agriculture picture. "Some 50 percent of the agricultural output in this country comes from small farms, a point often overlooked when it comes to our economy and the nation's food supply," said Richard Groce, Maury County Extension Agent and County Director.

Bart Krisle, Tennessee Farmers Co-op chief executive officer, echoed comments made earlier by UT President Joe DiPietro about the need for all forum representatives to work in partnership to ensure further industry growth and success, "All of us in this room need to be aware of what's going on around us (in the agriculture industry), get involved in the industry and be united with one voice for agriculture."

Tennessee has nearly 79,000 farms representing more than 10.9 million acres and more than half a million jobs. First Farmers facilitated the Forum out of its one hundred year commitment to farmers and their extraordinary value to Tennessee.

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**About First Farmers & Merchants Bank**

*Founded in 1909, First Farmers & Merchants Bank (Member FDIC) is one of the most successful independent banks in Tennessee, with total assets of approximately \$942 million and an additional \$3 billion in assets held by its Trust & Financial Management Department. Headquartered in Columbia, Tenn., and long the market leader in Maury County, the bank operates 18 offices in a seven county area in Middle Tennessee that includes Maury, Lawrence, Marshall, Hickman, Giles, Dickson and Williamson counties, and has almost 20 percent of all deposits in six of these counties. First Farmers is distinguished by its commitment to traditional, personal banking relationships that incorporate state-of-the-art technology to provide the highest possible level of service. For additional information, visit [www.myfirstfarmers.com](http://www.myfirstfarmers.com) or call the main office at (931) 388-3145.*