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SMITH AND McKEON: HIGHLANDS HEARING TODAY AND AGRICULTURE AMENDMENTS SHOULD ADDRESS CONCERNS OF FARMERS

TRENTON - Senator Bob Smith and Assemblyman John F. McKeon, who have been leading the effort to preserve and protect New Jersey's Highlands, today said that proposed Department of Agriculture amendments and Secretary of Agriculture Charles Kuperus's testimony today at the final public Highlands hearing held by the two legislative environmental panels, should adequately address the concerns of farmers who thought that they were being unfairly targeted by the bill.

"The debate to this point has largely been a semantic one over legislative intent in the bill," said Senator Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset, Chair of the Senate Environment Committee. "As one of the legislators who drafted this bill, I can say with absolute certainty that it was never our intent to punish farmers to save the Highlands. I think Secretary Kuperus's remarks to the joint committees today, and the agricultural amendments that will be in the final version of the bill, should stand to relieve any farmers who may have thought otherwise."

"Given the importance of the agriculture industry in the State, we have to take special care not to lessen the protection to farmers under current regulations," said Assemblyman McKeon, D-Essex, Chair of the Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee. "The amendments reflect an ongoing dialogue between our staff and the Department of Agriculture. We feel these provisions will allay the farmers' concerns."

The bill, known as the "Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act" (S-1 / A-2635), would restrict major development in a core area of environmentally-sensitive land in the Highlands region -- an area in Northwest New Jersey that provides water for more than half of the 9 million people residing in the State. Due to ambiguities in the original bill, however, many farmers felt that they were being restricted from farming in the Highlands, which was never intended by the legislative sponsors, Senators Smith and Robert Martin, and Assemblyman McKeon.

"New Jersey is the Garden State, and it would be impossible to keep the gardens and farms out of the Highlands area," said Senator Smith. "Farming is the lifeblood of rural northwestern New Jersey, and I think that the new agricultural amendments clarify that while water preservation is our goal, we will not place the burden on the backs of farmers in the Highlands. We hope, however, that the Highlands farmers can join us in working towards that goal, which will ultimately benefit everyone in the entire State."

The agricultural amendments exempt agriculture and horticulture from many of the restrictions in the original bill. They also include provisions that allow farmers to expand past the 3% restriction on impervious cover for agricultural development, provided that the farmers follow water conservation plans already established under the Department of Agriculture. See a description of the amendments, attached to this news release.

The Senate Environment Committee and the Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee will meet again on May 10 to vote on the bill. At this time, further testimony on the bill is not scheduled, however interested parties are encouraged to contact the legislators with their concerns.

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SEE ATTACHED FOR DESCRIPTION ON DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE'S
AMENDMENTS