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SMITH MEASURE TO PROTECT STATE FORESTS APPROVED BY SENATE

TRENTON – A bill sponsored by Senate Environment Committee Chair, Senator Bob Smith, which would establish a new forest stewardship program in the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to protect privately-owned forests in the Garden State was approved today by the Senate, receiving a vote of 35-3.

“New Jersey has taken a bold step in pledging to drastically cut greenhouse gas emissions by the year 2020,” said Senator Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset. “However, if we’re going to meet our greenhouse gas reduction goals in the next two decades, we need to protect our biggest weapon in the carbon-sequestering arsenal – our State’s lush forest land. Through this legislation, we’re extending support and incentives to good-faith forest stewards and ensuring that forestland will be preserved from overdevelopment and suburban sprawl.”

The bill, S-713, would direct the DEP to establish a forest stewardship program for the owners of forest land who develop preservation and forest sustainability plans that meet national forest stewardship guidelines, subject to approval by the Department. The program would offer financial incentives, including cost-sharing for stewardship activities listed under DEP-approved plans if funding is available, and property tax breaks similar to the current farmland assessment program established by the Farmland Assessment Act of 1964. As amended, the bill would also provide that revenue generated from the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative auction that is dedicated to forest stewardship would go into a dedicated fund, to provide grants to people to assist in developing forest stewardship plans.

“New Jersey has the resources and expertise to support private forest owners in being good stewards of their land,” said Senator Smith. “We need to provide strong incentives, including tax breaks and organizational support, to encourage forest owners to make the best environmental decisions for the State of New Jersey. This bill is about tapping existing State programs to preserve carbon-sequestering forests in danger of development.”

Senator Smith noted that the bill is especially important given the high density of construction in the State, and the pressure to build on any open space in New Jersey. He added that New Jersey needs to provide financial incentives to private owners of forest land to relieve some of the pressure and stop the spread of suburban sprawl onto forest land.

“New Jersey is the most densely populated State in the nation, and the pressure to develop any open space for residential use is immense,” said Senator Smith. “As we reach potential build-out, acres and acres of forests are being cleared to make way for suburban sprawl. We need a concerted effort on the part of the State to fight efforts to pave over New Jersey’s forests and keep the green in the Garden State.”

The bill now heads to the Assembly for consideration.