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NEW JERSEY FARM BUREAU SETS POLICY PRIORITIES FOR 2005

TRENTON, NJ (February 10, 2005) – Keeping farming viable while retaining its real-estate equity value is a major concern for New Jersey farmers facing a year of legislative challenges. The New Jersey Farm Bureau has set equity protection as a top priority and policy issue affecting its members. Other priority issues include minimum wage, the Highlands Act, property taxes on farm buildings, land-use issues, water supply, municipal downzoning to large building lots, wildlife management and farmland preservation. All may be coming before the legislature this year and all have the potential to impact the future profitability of New Jersey's farming community.

The proposed minimum wage increase can be potentially damaging to farm viability in the state, according to Farm Bureau research, with far reaching ramifications, including operating cost increases for produce that can encourage more importation from states that grow it cheaper. A recent study commissioned by the Farm Bureau shows that New Jersey residents place high value on the availability of locally grown produce. "But we don't know the pricing threshold that might trigger their purchase of imported produce over locally grown," says Richard Nieuwenhuis, Farm Bureau president.

The Farm Bureau commissioned two independent studies at the end of last year -- one on how much New Jersey residents know and care about farming in the state and another on the impact of downzoning on agricultural land value. Together, they show that while New Jersey farms make a valuable contribution to the quality of life within the state, their asset value may be at risk, as municipal planners increasingly utilize downzoning as a means to control sprawl.

New Jersey Residents' Attitudes Toward Farming

Fairleigh Dickinson's PublicMind Polling Institute conducted the first-ever survey on how New Jersey residents perceive farming in the Garden State (executive summary available on request). The random phone poll of more than 900 residents, age 18 and over throughout the state, showed a positive attitude toward farming that surprised even the Farm Bureau.

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“We were surprised and intensely gratified with what the survey indicated,” says Nieuwenhuis. “We were prepared to accept whatever were the results -- good or bad -- of PublicMind's questions on a wide range of issues. Our thinking was that farmers should be aware of all public attitudes, especially when legislation is being prepared that affects them.”

Going into the survey, the New Jersey Farm Bureau assumed that awareness of farming in the country's most densely populated state would not be very high, nor would respondents, especially in urban areas, care much about where their fruits and vegetables came from. The results contradicted both those assumptions, showing that a majority of residents actually have visited farms – mainly to buy fresh produce – and feel that it is very important to retain and preserve farmland within the state.

A whopping 87% of respondents would like to buy locally grown produce, with 35% saying they want to do so to support farming. Eighty-five percent responded that farming should play a valuable role in the future of New Jersey. Those who had visited farms placed a higher value on keeping them viable. “We obviously need to continue encouraging people to visit our farms,” says Nieuwenhuis. Interestingly, the survey also showed that 57% of respondents supported hunting as a means to limit wildlife damage to farm crops.

Downzoning

The first systematic statewide study of the economic impact of municipal downzoning on New Jersey's farmland owners, *The Impact of Downzoning on Agricultural Land Value in New Jersey*, conducted by Clarion/Samuels Associates, the Philadelphia affiliate of a national real estate consulting firm, showed that downzoning -- or large-lot zoning -- to control sprawl adversely affects farmers' equity in their land. The study corroborated the policies set forth in the NJ Department of Agriculture's *Agricultural Smart Growth Plan for New Jersey 2003*, which recognizes that “while downzoning may reduce the number of homes that can be built in a municipality, thus controlling density, it also spreads out those homes to consume more land that cannot be used for profitable farming, forestry or even recreation.” The Executive Summary of the Clarion/Samuels study (available on request) has been forwarded to 232 state communities with significant farmland acreage and will be utilized by the Farm Bureau to show how farmers lose property value when downzoning is used as a municipal planning tool to reduce development density.

The Highlands

In addressing the second meeting of the newly appointed Highlands Council, which focused on agriculture and the needs of farmers, Nieuwenhuis commended Secretary of Agriculture Charles Kuperus' remarks that preserving land is only one part of the equation, the farmers themselves must be ensured that they and their profession can remain viable.

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Nieuwenhuis reminded council members that Farm Bureau had not supported the Highlands Act because it lacked a dedicated funding source for Highlands land acquisitions and urged them to go forward with a study on current land values, offering Farm Bureau research and statistics in assistance.

He also cautioned the council to guard against erroneous public perceptions that land in the preservation area can never be utilized for any purpose and thus suffers from devaluation. "Land is the farmers' equity, their loan collateral and retirement fund," said Nieuwenhuis. "The Highlands Council must dispel possible perceptions that farmland within the preservation area has no monetary value or development potential. We feel that communication with the public must be a continuing priority in order to stave off these and other erroneous assumptions. Our members in the preservation area are reporting confusion and uncertainty with regard to land values and use."

The Farm Bureau in 2005 will also advocate for fair share funding at the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station through Rutgers Cooperative Research and Extension and Cook College. "The state appropriations for teaching, research and extension are paramount to support services for farmers," says Nieuwenhuis.

"Farming in New Jersey has a bright future, with scientific advances in food production and demand for locally grown, healthy produce gaining strength among an increasingly educated public," he continues. "The PublicMind survey showed that support for New Jersey farmers is strong. But the general feeling among farmers is that their land and interests are caught in the middle of the ongoing "stop-sprawl" debate. Often, the interests of developers and environmental groups get attention, leaving the farmers out of that debate, which certainly impacts them. Our task is to make the public aware of all the quality of life issues that affect the viability of farming. "

The New Jersey Farm Bureau is a member organization of more than 19,000 farmers and farm-related entities within the Garden State. It is the only organization solely dedicated to representing the grass- roots interests and directives of its members in educating all levels of government and the public on the farm community's policies and positions. The Farm Bureau also takes a lead in seeking out initiatives, activities and ventures to enhance the profitability of producer members and the ensure the viability of agriculture in New Jersey -- *the Garden State for Good Reason.*

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