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NEW JERSEY FARM BUREAU COMMENTS ON THE DEP HIGHLANDS RULES

Trenton, NJ (June 9, 2005) -- On May 9th, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) adopted special rules, effective through May 2006, to implement the new environmental standards established by the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act of 2004. The New Jersey Farm Bureau, which is familiar with the legislative process that resulted in the Highlands Act and has been active with the Highlands Council, maintains that many of the DEP mandates are arbitrary and not supported by science. The special rules adopted by the DEP will adversely impact farmers and property owners in the Highlands Preservation Area, according to the Farm Bureau.

"We urge property owners and local governments in the preservation area to scrutinize these rules very carefully, consider the potential restrictions on uses of individual properties, and make their concerns known to the Highlands Council and the DEP," says Richard Nieuwenhuis, president of Farm Bureau. "The large-lot septic densities of 25 acres and 88 acres contained in the rule will devalue property and continue to promote sprawl. The exorbitant fees associated with permits and applications will hurt landowners and commercial property owners. There are even fees associated with applications for activities that are exempt from the act.

As farmers and homeowners apply for DEP Highlands Permits on their properties, they will face new deed restrictions and conservation easements on unused portions of their properties. The Farm Bureau feels that these exactions go far beyond the intent of the legislation, which was to develop a regional plan to balance environmental resource protection with continued economic development and growth in the Highlands.

"The rules once again demonstrate the disconnect between bureaucratic policy making and sound planning for the region," Nieuwenhuis continues. "The environmental regulatory process is driving the planning program without taking into full account the needs of individuals, businesses, landowners and farmers in the region. Sussex County farmer Rich Vohden put it succinctly during a Highlands Council meeting seeking input from officials in Sussex, Passaic and Bergen Counties: 'the state must provide education & compensation--not regulation...every new set of regs knocks out a few more farmers'."

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Relevant state agencies, organizations and individuals, including the Highlands Council, have been given 45 days, until June 23rd, for review and comment. Hopefully, those comments will be incorporated into the permanent rules DEP develops for the Highlands. Though the Highlands Act calls for the DEP to consult with The Highlands Council, the Departments of Agriculture, Community Affairs, and Transportation, the final rules will be solely determined by the DEP

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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 ensure the viability of agriculture in New Jersey -- *the Garden State for Good Reason -- our farms.*

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