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‘HIGHLANDS COUNCIL: SEEK A BALANCE!’

‘Follow the legislative mandate; avoid environmental advocate pressure tactics’

Trenton, NJ (June 11, 2008) – New Jersey Farm Bureau encourages the Highlands Council to keep a balanced view of its legislative mandate as it finishes its work in final approval of its Regional Master Plan (RMP). Almost four years after the passage of the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act, the Council and its staff are now meeting in bi-weekly sessions to complete the review of a vast set of policies and guidelines for the 860,000 acre region. The legislation that was enacted is cited by many as being one of the most sweeping and hard-hitting environmental protection laws in the nation.

“We think the Council would be well-advised to observe a sense of balance and fairness in administration of its powerful charter,” said NJFB President Richard Nieuwenhuis, “especially in light of sparse development pressure and the failure of the Legislature to create a funding mechanism for landowner compensation.” He also said: “The Highlands Act incorporates several features, such as leaving municipal compliance for Planning Area municipalities to be on a voluntary basis, based on a consensus of support from all affected parties. A planning mandate incorporating transportation, housing, farming viability, economic development and other criteria is the statute’s purpose and creates the need for accommodating a variety of interests.”

Nieuwenhuis expressed concern that recent statements by Highlands environmental advocates unfairly accuse the Council of falling short of its mission. “These criticisms are the same old rhetoric of ‘my way or else’, ” he said, “which is tantamount to giving environmental regulation hard-liners a chance to re-write the Highlands Act and selfishly suit their own goals.”

Farm Bureau scoffed at allegations that the water supply in the region could be at risk if the RMP is not amended. “That’s just a case of Chicken Little saying the sky is falling it is incredible to us that anyone could claim that the proposed plan and other Highlands regulations are weak. It’s a scare tactic designed to manipulate the politics of the situation. In reality, the Highlands program is virtually a case of overkill regulatory power already,” continued Nieuwenhuis.

He added: “Having addressed the environmental protection mandate in its draft proposal, the Council still needs to address the economic impacts on the farms and regional economy of this plan. There may be little new funding available from the state government to help implement the plan, for things such as the TDR program, so features like the cluster/conservation design planning tool become very important to cushion the harsh regulatory impacts of the plan. Clustering should be preferred over land-use designs that consume valuable farm acreage, and can hardly be considered ‘urban density’ in the countryside.”

Farm Bureau has been a consistent monitor and participant in the Highlands Council planning process from the outset. There are approximately 800 farms on 110,000 acres in the Highlands region. Farm Bureau maintains a statewide membership of 14,000 households including hundreds of Highlands farmers and is headquartered in Trenton.

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