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CONTACT:

Pegi Adam, 973-744-6090, pegi@mountsnow.org

Peter Furey, 609-636-2850, pfurey9119@aol.com

NEW JERSEY CHRISTMAS TREES READY FOR CUTTING OR PURCHASING
Farmers report healthy Christmas trees sufficient to meet growing demand for fresh-cut

Trenton, NJ (date) -- Locally grown Christmas trees, cut to order, are healthier, smell sweeter and last longer, according to an informal survey of Christmas tree farmers conducted by the New Jersey Farm Bureau. Additionally, one of their biggest draws is that touch of old-fashioned holiday nostalgia -- trekking through the fields in search of that perfect tree. Choosing a live tree is an increasingly popular winter activity for families all over the state and as far away as New York City, Long Island and Philadelphia.

According to George Black of Glenview Farm in Blairstown (Warren County), he and most growers he knows in the area will end up selling all their mature trees. He sees a growing demand for ever-taller trees. While the average height is still seven to eight feet, about 50% of his customers want heights of 10, 12, even 14 feet, "to soar to the cathedral ceilings of those McMansions," he says.

And farmers see the selling season kicking off earlier each year, with many buyers arriving in mid-November, some just to tag trees that they'll pick up later, while others take them home and set them up for Thanksgiving. Mark Newcomb of Ponderosa Tree Farm in Egg Harbor (Atlantic County) attributes such early sales to the availability of field trees for cutting. "Douglas fir, our number one seller, will last six to eight weeks if cut fresh," he says.

The first three weekends in December (Dec 3, 10 and 19 this year) generally tell the tale of how profitable the state's Christmas tree industry is. Many New Jersey farmers sell all the trees they have available -- depending, of course, on the weather.

"If the weather stays dry and crisp, but not too cold for roaming the fields, Christmas tree farms will do well this year," says Richard Nieuwenhuis, president of the New Jersey Farm Bureau. "But, the summer drought certainly affected newly planted seedlings. Farmers lost anywhere from 25 to 50% of what they planted last spring. The trees take from eight to ten years to mature, so they'll be able to make up those losses with larger plantings next year, depending on normal growing conditions, of course."

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Mark Newcomb planted 4,000 trees and lost 50% to drought. John Wyckoff of Wyckoff's Tree Farm in Belvidere (Warren County) lost a third of his 6,000 spring transplants. Deer are also a continuing problem for Christmas tree farmers, eating the tender tiny transplants. "Deer damaged 25% of our crop this year," says Les Guile of Walnut Grove Farm in Augusta (Sussex Co).

New Jersey's most popular Christmas tree is Douglas fir, probably because it holds both needles and ornaments well and is a good value. But rising in popularity are Frazer and Cannan firs, and the perennially popular Norway and Blue spruce. In south Jersey, white pine continues to be popular, but it is declining in North Jersey. Concolor is one of the newest varieties and increasingly popular as people discover it.

According to the US Department of Agriculture's 2002 agricultural census (the latest figures available), New Jersey has 899 Christmas tree farms in all geographic regions of the state, with sales totaling \$3,852,000 and representing 0.5% of the state's total agricultural sales. Nationally, the US Department of Agriculture ranked "cut Christmas trees and short-rotation woody crops" last in 16 categories, representing just 0.2% of all agricultural sales.

New Jersey Christmas tree farms offer a range of tree-shopping experiences in tree shopping, from horse-drawn cart rides to supplied hand-saws for those who want to do the whole exercise (no power saws allowed). Customers can select trees that staff cuts to order, rooted trees for transplanting and pre-cut trees; some farms permit early tagging for later pick-up. On-farm Christmas shops serve hot cider and donuts, host holiday craft workshops and sell their own hand-made wreaths, garlands, grave covers and holiday decor.

Farmers in Sussex and Warren Counties report a growing business from New York City residents. The Farm Bureau sees this trend as an extension of the growing demand for farm-fresh foods and pick-your-own fruits and vegetables.

"City dwellers brought their children to the farms in summer to familiarize them with how their food is grown," says Richard Nieuwenhuis. "They want to keep the connection alive as the seasons change, giving the kids experiences that may or may not reflect their own childhood traditions, but certainly fit their fantasies of trekking through pungent evergreen forests in a bracing winter wonderland."

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The New Jersey Farm Bureau is a member organization of more than 16,000 farmers and farm-related individuals 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.*

For further information, contact the New Jersey Farm Bureau, at The Farmhouse, 168 West State Street, Trenton, NJ 08608. Phone 609-393-7163; fax 609-393-7072; email mail@njfb.org; website www.njfb.org