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SMITH BILL TO APPROPRIATE \$15 MILLION FOR FARMLAND PRESERVATION IN THE HIGHLANDS APPROVED

TRENTON - A bill sponsored by Senator Bob Smith which would appropriate \$15 million for farmland preservation in the Highlands region was unanimously approved by the Senate today.

"For the Highlands Water Protection Act to be successful, we need to make a substantial public investment into land preservation in the region," said Senator Smith. "It's not enough that we declare certain sensitive watershed lands as off-limits to development. We need to put our money where our mouths, and hearts, are, to truly protect this valuable water supply from contamination and pollution brought on by overdevelopment."

The bill, S-2025, would provide \$15 million from the "Garden State Farmland Preservation Trust Fund" for grants to various counties and municipalities within the Highlands region for up to 80% of the cost of acquisition of development rights on farmland properties. Under the initial Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act, championed by Senator Smith in 2004, key watershed land was declared off-limits to development, and at the time Senator Smith noted that continued financial investment was needed to protect these lands and help make property owners economically whole.

"It has been our intention from the start to do what we can to help property owners in the Highlands region," said Senator Smith. "This bill, as well as future State aid to the Preservation Area defined by the original Highlands Act, is proof-positive that, though we stand firm on the need to protect the drinking water supply for nearly half of the State, we are doing what we can for property owners as well. With public investment, we think we can accomplish the environmental goals of preserving the pristine water quality of the Highlands without stagnating the local tax base."

The bill now heads to the Assembly for consideration.