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SMITH MEASURE TO PROTECT STATE FORESTS APPROVED IN **COMMITTEE**

TRENTON – A bill sponsored by Senate Environment Committee Chair, Senator Bob Smith, which would establish a new forest stewardship program in the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to protect privately-owned forests in the Garden State was unanimously approved today.

“When you talk about carbon sequestering and reducing global warming, forests are the number one most important tool in removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and reversing the global warming trend,” said Senator Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset. “For that reason, the public has a major stake in privately-owned forest land. We need to protect and preserve our forests, and encourage owners of privately-owned forest land to make long-term plans to maintain and sustain our State’s canopy.”

The bill, S-713, would direct the DEP to establish a forest stewardship program for the owners of forest land who develop preservation and forest sustainability plans that meet national forest management guidelines, subject to approval by the Department. The program would offer financial incentives, including cost-sharing for stewardship activities listed under DEP-approved plans if funding is available, and property tax breaks similar to the current farmland assessment program established by the Farmland Assessment Act of 1964. As amended, the bill would also provide that revenue generated from the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative auction that is dedicated to forest management would go into a dedicated fund, to provide grants to people to assist in developing forest stewardship plans.

“In addition to the environmental benefits of healthy forests in the State, so many recreational activities depend on forest land,” said Senator Smith. “Even privately-owned forests provide a huge public benefit, and we need to provide the resources and tools to help forest owners make the ecologically-friendly, socially-beneficial choices to preserve forests in New Jersey.”

Senator Smith noted that the bill is especially important given the high density of construction in the State, and the pressure to build on any open space in New Jersey. He added that New Jersey needs to provide financial incentives to private owners of forest land to relieve some of the pressure and stop the spread of suburban sprawl onto forest land.

“As we reach build-out capacity, suburban sprawl continues to threaten the only unspoiled, undeveloped lands left in New Jersey,” said Senator Smith. “We need to give forest owners some incentive to protect their land from the bulldozer, because, to paraphrase Joyce Kilmer, ‘I think that I shall never see a Mini-mart as lovely as a tree.’ Without some sort of financial incentive to protect and preserve our forest land, more and more acres will be clear-cut to continue to pave the way for build-out in the Garden State.”

The bill now heads to the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee for review, before going to the full Senate for consideration.