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SMITH MEASURE TO PROTECT STATE FORESTS APPROVED IN BUDGET 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 approved today by the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee by a vote of 9-0, with 4 abstentions.

“New Jersey’s forests are our most important tool in carbon sequestering and reversing global warming in the Garden State,” said Senator Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset. “We have a public interest in ensuring the continued vitality and sustainability of forest-land, not only in terms of public recreation, but also in terms of environmental protection. By tapping into existing preservation programs, we can ensure that New Jersey’s forests will survive over-development and suburban sprawl and continue to contribute to our efforts to reduce global warming in the State.”

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 stewardship 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 stewardship would go into a dedicated fund, to provide grants to people to assist in developing forest stewardship plans.

“Through this bill, we want to give forest-landowners the support they need, in terms of technical expertise and financial incentives, to protect and preserve their forestlands,” said Senator Smith. “By directing the DEP to develop a forest stewardship program, we are setting up a system to share best practices and results-oriented techniques with the people on the ground, doing their part to preserve forests in the State.”

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 continue to head towards build-out in New Jersey – the most densely populated state in the nation – open space is at a premium, and many private landowners may be tempted to sell their forest-land to developers,” said Senator Smith. “We need to enhance public support to give forest-landowners an added incentive to keep their land green and preserve carbon-sequestering forests in the Garden State.”

The bill now heads to the full Senate for consideration.