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SMITH MEASURE TO PROTECT STATE FORESTS RECEIVES **ASSEMBLY APPROVAL**

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 Assembly by a vote of 67-8, with 2 abstentions, with final legislative approval pending before the Senate later today.

“With laws like last session’s ‘Global Warming Response Act,’ New Jersey has staked out a position as a national leader in battling the threat of climate change,” said Senator Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset. “However, if we’re going to meet the bold greenhouse gas reduction goals we’ve set for ourselves, we have to take steps to protect our greatest tool for carbon-sequestration – the State’s lush, green forest land. Through this bill, we’re extending support and preservation incentives to forest stewards who act in good faith to protect their land from overdevelopment and stand strong against suburban sprawl.”

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 modeled after the federal forest stewardship program, and property tax breaks similar to the current State 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.

“Forest stewardship isn’t just about preserving open acres of forest land from being spoiled by new development,” said Senator Smith. “It’s about ensuring that New Jersey has the natural resources to help remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, and hopefully put downward pressure on global climate change. An incentive program to encourage good-faith forest stewardship is appropriate and quite frankly necessary to keep New Brunswick and Piscataway from turning into beachfront property.”

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 one of the most densely populated states in the nation, New Jersey faces more pressure than anywhere else to build on every acre of undeveloped land,” said Senator Smith. “Particularly as we move ever close to build-out, the pressure to clear-cut forests to make way for more suburban sprawl is getting greater and greater. We need a forest stewardship program in New Jersey to hopefully give forest land owners the support they need to stand strong against pressure from developers, and to keep their land green.”

The bill, if approved by the Senate later today, would then head to the Governor to be signed into law.