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SENATE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE TO DISCUSS FUTURE FUNDING OF OPEN SPACE PROJECTS

Committee Will Weigh Bills to Ensure Long Term Viability of Green & Blue Acres, Farmland and Historic Preservation Funds

TRENTON – Members of the Senate Environment and Energy Committee will meet Monday, February 4, 2013 to hear testimony on and consider several proposed options for funding open space preservation projects in New Jersey. The Committee will meet at 10 AM in Committee Room 10, 3rd Floor of the Statehouse Annex.

"As the most densely populated state in the country, open space is at a premium in New Jersey. It is our job as stewards of the environment to ensure that there are protected open parcels of land for the enjoyment of our children and our grandchildren. Maintaining our farmland and open spaces also will go a long way to help protect the quality of life in the Garden State for future generations," said Senator Bob Smith, (D-Middlesex) Chairman of the Senate Environment and Energy Committee. "New Jersey has been the national standard for open space preservation, and since 1961, residents have overwhelmingly voted to dedicate funding towards protecting our open space. But now the pot has run dry. We must look at all the options to ensure continued funding of these important programs."

Open space funding goes to acquiring and developing lands for recreation and conservation purposes, preserving farmland and funding historic preservation and Blue Acres projects. Green Acres has protected nearly 640,000 acres of open space in the Garden State since its inception.

The Committee will hear testimony relating to the following three bills:

- The Preserve New Jersey Act of 2013, S-2529, would dedicate – upon public approval of a constitutional amendment, SCR-138 – \$200 million annually of New Jersey sales tax revenue for the next 30 years for open space projects;
- The Green Acres, Water Supply and Floodplain Protection, and Farmland and Historic Preservation Bond Act of 2013, S-2530, would authorize – upon public approval – the issuance of \$400 million in state bonds for open space projects; and
- A bill, S-813, would establish – upon public approval of a constitutional amendment, SCR-44 – a water usage fee of 40 cents per thousand gallons of water delivered to the consumer, which is estimated to generate annually \$150 million annually for open space projects.

"Whether it is a dedicated portion of the sales tax, a surcharge on water consumption or a bond act, with this trio of bills we will be weighing numerous options to continue a program that has protected hundreds of thousands of acres of land throughout the state. But in the end, we will look to the voters to decide how we will fund the program," said Senator Smith.

New Jersey voters have approved open space funding bond acts by large margins 13 times since 1961. Most recently, New Jersey voters in 2009 approved a \$400 million bond act, all of which has now been spent. According to a Fairleigh Dickinson PublicMind poll, 83 percent of New Jersey residents approve of public funding for open space and preserved farmland.

Open space funding can also be used for Blue Acres projects – a willing seller program that buys flood-prone land and land that buffers or protects other lands from storm damage. Senator Smith

notes that long-term funding of this program is even more essential as climate change is causing "100 year storms" to occur at more regular intervals, - such as Hurricanes Irene and