

2012 State Agriculture Development Committee Highlights

New Preservation Milestone – The State Farmland Preservation Program in September reached a major milestone with the preservation of the 200,000th acre of farmland under the program. The State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC) hosted an event at Cassaday Farms in Upper Pittsgrove Township, Salem County, where Secretary Fisher joined farmland preservation partners from across the state to announce the achievement. A total of 2,146 farms covering 201,000 acres had been permanently preserved by year's end, including 89 farms covering nearly 12,000 acres in the Pinelands and 450 farms covering approximately 37,000 acres in the Highlands.

Princeton Nurseries Preserved – The SADC in August closed on the preservation of 847 acres of farmland on the former Princeton Nurseries property in Central New Jersey as part of one of the largest joint preservation projects in the history of the Farmland Preservation and Green Acres programs. The project, which also included county, local and nonprofit participation, resulted in the preservation of nearly 1,900 acres in Monmouth, Burlington and Mercer counties for open space and farmland preservation purposes.

New Funding Authorized – The SADC's FY2013 appropriation request for \$83.1 million to continue farmland preservation efforts was approved by the Garden State Preservation Trust in November, and the Legislature passed appropriations bills in December. The bills – awaiting the Governor's signature in early 2013 – will utilize the remaining 2009 bond funds that had been approved by voters for farmland preservation purposes.

Renewable Energy Rules Advance – The SADC in September proposed new rules for solar energy generation on preserved farms pursuant to N.J.S.A. 4:1C-32.4. That law required the SADC to develop rules that address both solar and wind energy generation on preserved farm, and right-to-farm protection for solar and wind energy generation systems on commercial farms. The SADC is expected to adopt final rules for solar energy on preserved farms in early 2013.

The SADC in 2011 had adopted an agricultural management practice (AMP) for solar energy generation that established standards for right-to-farm protection. The Committee is expected to approve additional rule proposals in early 2013 for wind energy generation as it relates to both preserved farms and right-to-farm protection.

Preservation Planning Expands -- By year's end, a total of 18 counties and 46 municipalities had developed comprehensive farmland preservation plans that enable them to participate in the SADC's County and Municipal Planning Incentive Grant (PIG) Programs. The plans identify short- and long-term farmland preservation goals as well as strategies to sustain agriculture as an industry. Altogether, the plans seek to preserve approximately 216,000 acres over a 10-year period at a total cost of \$2.5 billion.

On-Farm Direct Marketing AMP Drafted – The SADC in December reviewed a final draft agricultural management practice (AMP) for direct-marketing facilities, activities and events. The SADC expects to consider it as a formal rule proposal in January. The AMP was developed by an SADC working group that included farmers and representatives of New Jersey Farm Bureau, Rutgers University, county agriculture development boards and the planning community. It clarifies terms in the Right to Farm Act and establishes performance-based standards that commercial farms must meet to be eligible for right-to-farm protection for retail farm markets and for various agriculture-related educational and farm-based recreational activities and events.

Staff Reorganized – The SADC realigned staff to foster better coordination in acquisition efforts and to place an increased focus on stewardship activities. Three regional acquisition coordinators were appointed to work more closely with county and local farmland preservation staff and landowners, and a new real estate assistant was hired to handle closing transactions. A new Chief of Agricultural Resources was hired to oversee stewardship and Right-to-Farm efforts and enable the SADC to increase its focus on promoting agricultural viability.

Superior Court Rules on Soil Destruction – In a significant victory for the State's farmland preservation efforts, a Superior Court judge in August found that a Hunterdon County commercial plant grower is liable for major soil disturbance and destruction on a preserved farm. The judge found in favor of the SADC, which initiated legal action after determining that the grower had destroyed a large area of a preserved farm in the process of preparing the land for hoopouses. The judge ruled that the treatment of the land violated the Agriculture Retention and Development Act and the farmland preservation deed restrictions.

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