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NEWS RELEASE

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Farmland Preservation Program Awarded \$1.4 Million Federal Grant

New Jersey's program to preserve farmland for future generations is \$1.4 million greener, thanks to a grant from USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Gov. Christie Whitman announced today.

The grant was awarded to the Garden State under a federal program designed to help states preserve valuable and vulnerable farmland.

"This grant will increase the legacy of valuable, irreplaceable farmland we pass on to future generations by 2,444 acres statewide," said Governor Whitman.

"We've been pleased to have the federal government as a partner in our program to preserve our farmland over the past three years, but funding for this federal program is now exhausted," Whitman added. "This makes voter support for the open space and farmland preservation question on November's ballot even more important for all of us."

Voters will decide in November whether to approve the Governor's plan to dedicate \$100 million each year for ten years to preserve 1 million acres of open space and farmland in New Jersey.

New Jersey Agriculture Secretary Art Brown, Jr., noted that the Garden State's agriculture industry provides benefits that extend far beyond the bounty of farm products enjoyed by millions of consumers every year.

"Here in New Jersey farmland also offers us and our families beautiful scenic areas, taxpaying open space, wildlife habitat, ground water recharge areas and other environmental and economic benefits that we can't afford to lose," Brown said. "That's why our Farmland Preservation Program has always enjoyed strong support from all New Jerseyans and we hope that support will continue in November."

The federal funds will be combined with state and county funds to purchase development easements on 16 properties covering 2,444 acres in 14 eligible counties around the state (list follows). Fourteen of these properties represent the highest ranked farms in each of the eligible counties in the most recent round of acquisitions approved by the State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC) which administers the state's Farmland Preservation Program (FPP). The other two will be purchased by the SADC and re-sold with permanent deed restrictions into private ownership at public auctions.

To draw down the federal funds, eligible counties will purchase development easements using SADC, county and, in some cases, municipal funds. The federal funds, which will cover approximately 14 percent of the development easement values on each farm, will be reimbursed to the SADC, the counties and/or municipalities after the acquisition. The SADC and local governments will split the 14 percent federal cost-share grant on a pro-rata basis.

New Jersey is one of 19 states that will share the FFY98 allocation of \$17.2 million and exhaust the \$35 million included in the 1996 Farm Bill for the federal Farmland Protection Program. In FFY96 and 97, the SADC received a total of \$1.2 million which helped to preserve 13 farms covering almost 2,600 acres in 13 counties.

To qualify for the federal program, properties submitted to the NRCS had to be part of a pending offer from the state; be privately owned; have an approved conservation plan developed in consultation with the NRCS; be large enough to sustain agricultural production; be accessible to markets for what the farm produces; and have surrounding parcels of land that can support long-term agricultural production.

New Jersey's FPP, often cited as a national model, is now in its sixteenth year and has already helped counties to permanently preserve 315 farms covering 48,440 acres of farmland.

Each year's acquisitions are purchased with a combination of bond funds appropriated by the State Legislature and local funds generated through a variety of mechanisms. The state share of the easement purchases has averaged about 64 percent of the total cost.

Other states awarded similar federal grants included California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington and Wisconsin. Together, the 217 approved parcels cover more than 53,000 acres of land with an estimated total value of \$105 million.