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Office of the Governor
NEWS RELEASE

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**Governor Establishes Farmland Preservation Planning Incentive Grant Program;
Announces Additional State Efforts to Aid Farmers During Drought**

Gov. Christie Whitman today signed legislation that will provide cash incentives to towns to develop plans to preserve farmland and also announced new steps the state is taking to aid farmers affected by the drought. The Governor spent the day touring Hunterdon, Warren and Sussex counties.

"Our farms are a vital part of our state economy and the drought has placed a huge strain on the farmers of the Garden State," said Gov. Whitman. "Preserving our farmland and ensuring that our farmers get the support they need during tough times like these are two ways we can protect the vital natural resources of our state."

At the bill signing, the Governor announced that she will push forward with three new steps to aid New Jersey farmers who are suffering through the abnormally dry conditions that have been bearing down on the state.

The Governor said she has asked the NJ Department of Agriculture to take the following steps:

- Set up a hotline, that will be available next Monday, for farmers to call and receive information on what assistance is available.
- Work on developing loan and grant programs for farmers.
- Due to the reliance on hay for feed at dairy farms the department will ask farmers to step forward and donate hay and will also look for volunteers to transport the hay.

A-1869, sponsored by Assemblywoman Connie Myers (R- Warren/Hunterdon/Mercer) and Senators William Bennett (R-Monmouth) and Robert Martin (R-Essex/Morris/Passaic), establishes the program which will provide grants to eligible municipalities and counties for farmland preservation purposes. The bill is intended to supplement the current farmland preservation program by providing new incentives for meeting the existing program's goals.

"Through these new incentive grants, we'll make it easier for municipalities to develop comprehensive plans to preserve large continuous tracts of farmland," said Gov. Whitman. "The bottom line is more farms preserved forever. More open space to add to our 10-year goal of preserving for all time 1 million acres of open space and farmland and a better quality of life for all New Jerseyans."

The legislation amends the "Agriculture Retention and Development Act." Currently, individual landowners apply for farmland preservation funding. With the new program, local entities will be better equipped to develop comprehensive plans to preserve large contiguous tracts of farmland.

Under the bill, municipalities and counties must be located in an area that participates in a program pursuant to the "Agriculture Retention and Redevelopment Act", establish an agricultural advisory committee, have an approved dedicated source of funding and have its plan approved by the county agriculture development board and the State Agriculture Development Committee.

Additionally, local planning boards must include in its master plan a report on a farmland preservation plan element when appropriate. The grants will be funded through the Garden State Preservation Trust Fund.

The Governor signed the legislation at Swift Farms in Alexandria, a 93-acre farm which primarily produces hay and beef cattle.

Governor Whitman continued from Swift Farms to Belvidere where she presented a check for \$126,898 to Warren County. The money represents the state share in the development easement purchase of Risko Farm. Risko farm is the first of seven to be preserved this year in Warren County under the Farmland Preservation Program. This funding is just part of the \$1.9 million dollar appropriation set aside to preserve 7 farms in Warren County.

Risko Farm is a 97-acre farm located in Harmony Township that produces field crops. Mr. Risko farms over 1,000 acres in Warren County.

"The fact is we all benefit when farms are part of our long-range forecast for New Jersey-and we can maximize that benefit by ensuring that we preserve land where it makes the most sense," said Gov. Whitman. "Not only is that good for Warren County, but it will also help ensure that our farms remain a vital part of the Garden State."

Later in the day the Governor took a tour of the Land of Make Believe, an amusement park in Hope Township. The 30-acre park features rides, shows, water parks and picnic areas and opened its gates in 1954.

In addition, the Governor stopped by the New Jersey School for Conservation at Montclair State University in Branchville. The school provides programs to elementary and secondary school students during the school year. Students and their teachers participate in residential environmental programs for anywhere between two and a half to five days. Ten-day graduate courses are also offered to teachers and environmental leaders completing advanced degrees. The school also features a one-week Junior Fly Fishing School in August and a Music Ecology Camp.

At the end of the day, the Governor attended the Sussex County Farm and Horse Show. The show is a ten-day event that offers activities and exhibits related to horticulture agriculture, and the equine industry. It also features a carnival and entertainment and expects to draw around 700 people.

Governor Whitman's visit to the area comes during an extremely tough time for farmers feeling the effects of the drought. New Jersey was granted a disaster declaration by the US Department of Agriculture earlier this week. This declaration will allow farmers to apply for low interest loans.

The Governor also sent a letter to House Speaker Dennis Hastert on Tuesday, asking him to add crop loss emergency aid grants into the fiscal year 2000 Agriculture Appropriations bill. Currently, there are no grants included in the bill.