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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**NEW JERSEY FARM BUREAU DISPUTES BASIS FOR CLOSING DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

**Trenton, NJ (February 26, 2008)** – The New Jersey Farm Bureau strongly objects to the governor’s proposed elimination of the Department of Agriculture as a cost-cutting measure. “Closing the NJDA saves the state budget very little money, since most of its vital services will need to be transferred to other state agencies,” says Richard Nieuwenhuis, president of the Farm Bureau. “After all the essential functions are reassigned, this could mean a savings of as little as \$300,000 or \$400,000.

“We feel very strongly that this is unjustified and an error in judgment, let alone being hugely demoralizing to everyone in agriculture,” he continues. “NJDA has always been an exceptional agency, which operates efficiently and delivers vital support services to the farming community, as well as to the public. This is an agency that contributes tangibly to the quality of life in New Jersey, something few other state agencies can have said about them. The agricultural community highly values having both a cabinet member and experienced staff representing agriculture’s interests. This staff is also accessible to assist and educate the general public on issues related to this specialized industry.”

Farm Bureau urges the governor and legislature to consider the value and vital services of the Department of Agriculture, both to consumers who never go near a farm but increasingly want locally grown fresh farm products, and to the state’s farming community facing current and future pressure from many different factions, which if not countered, could cause the demise of agriculture in the Garden State.

The Department of Agriculture directs the ‘Jersey Fresh’ marketing program and supports community farmers markets that bring fresh local produce to residents of our ‘urban’ state. Closing it would be counterproductive in these days of shipping food across the country and the corresponding food safety and “carbon footprint” concerns.

The Secretary of Agriculture serves as chairman of the farmland preservation program. The state has invested nearly \$1.1 billion to preserve almost 164,000 acres of farmland. Closing the NJDA removes the natural leadership for this broadly supported, public investment in open space.

“Preserving farms is almost an overwhelming task, demanding a separate agency to direct it,” says Nieuwenhuis. “Without a Department of Agriculture, this process would undoubtedly fall from priority until it’s too late to save farmland from being absorbed by development.

It is the go-to agency on issues of food safety, pet and livestock feed inspections, plant pest control (think of the current gypsy moth scourge), emergency food distribution to food banks and soup kitchens, and a national leader in school nutrition programs with 637,000 school lunch participants. It is the agency that oversees farmland preservation and advocates on behalf of agriculture in this state and acts as liaison with federal agencies such as USDA and the Food and Drug Administration.

“Farmers are already skeptical about the erosion of state support for their industry. They feel under adverse pressure from current legislation (Highlands Act) and regulations that don’t allow them to protect or direct their lands and crops. Closing the Department of Agriculture will be viewed by an already demoralized constituency as the last straw for its struggling industry.

“Finally,” Nieuwenhuis concludes, “agriculture generates millions of dollars in revenue for the state budget and contributes billions to the overall economy; it in no way is a source of the state budget deficit.

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