

# Farm boards say 'No' to Highlands

## New state measure opposed in Somerset and Hunterdon.

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The Somerset County Agriculture Development Board has backed its counterpart in Hunterdon County over concerns about provisions of the recently signed state Highlands law and funding restrictions on farmland preservation.

The strongly worded letter of Aug. 20 from the Somerset board's president, William Randolph, doesn't

pull any punches. It calls the law "a hastily prepared, politically motivated piece of legislation that severely impacts agriculture."

The letter questions the bill's potential to devalue land owned by farmers and the lack of a funding mechanism to compensate property owners for lost value for acreage in the Highlands preservation area.

The letter challenged state officials, saying that unless they can provide a

dedicated funding source to compensate landowners affected by the law, the Somerset board cannot support the law and will call for its repeal.

"I wasn't expecting the Somerset board to weigh in, and I was thrilled they decided to do so and to use the strong language they used," said Marcia Karrow, director of the Hunterdon County Board of Freeholders.

The Somerset agriculture board wrote that besides supporting the Hunterdon County and Warren County freeholders and agriculture officials, it backs "any action they deem necessary to

further their efforts."

Hunterdon and Warren freeholders are continuing to research a possible constitutional challenge to the law and are interviewing legal firms to do that work, Karrow said.

Hunterdon's decision not to fund its share in the purchase of three farms, which fall within the Highlands Preservation area, brought the wrath of the state Agriculture Department on the county.

A proposed amendment to state farmland preservation criteria, for which the state seeks local comment, includes a change to deny

farm preservation money to any county or local government with policies inconsistent with state law — specifically the Highlands law.

Agriculture Secretary Charles M. Kuperus threatened to ask for that rule change after the Hunterdon freeholders voted in July against funding two Lebanon Township farms and, in June, a Tewksbury farm within the Highlands preservation area. The freeholders contend that the land would be preserved by the state and that county money should be spent on land threatened by development

under the Highlands law.

Warren County's agriculture board also passed a resolution of support, but the state board is closing the comment period on the rules on Sept. 9 and is scheduled to vote on the measure on Sept. 23, Karrow said.

A request to extend the comment period beyond Sept. 9 was denied, which Karrow criticized because most agriculture boards are off for the summer in August.

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