

RESOLUTION # 29

HIGHLANDS REGIONAL MASTER PLAN

1 **WHEREAS**, the Highlands Act, signed into law in August 2004, divided the 850,000-
2 acre Highlands region into two areas: a preservation area, where development would be
3 strictly regulated, and a planning area, where development would be monitored; and
4 established a Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council charged to prepare and
5 implement a regional master plan for the entire Highlands region; and

6 **WHEREAS**, with lessons learned by the agricultural community in the Pinelands, the
7 Highlands law included significant relief for agricultural and horticultural activities and related
8 development in the preservation area, and as a result, agricultural development and activities
9 in the preservation area are part of a separate process from the strict regulations that are
10 imposed by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection upon “major
11 development” (defined as one-quarter acre of impervious cover or one acre of any soil
12 disturbance) in the preservation area; and

13 **WHEREAS**, the New Jersey Department of Agriculture developed and adopted rules
14 to implement the separate process for agricultural development and activities in the Highlands
15 Preservation Area; and

16 **WHEREAS**, 588 farms, covering 48,091 acres of farmland, had been preserved in the
17 Highlands region as of December 1, 2022; 243 farms covering 19,490 acres in the Preservation
18 Area and 354 farms covering 29,979 acres in the Planning Area; and

19 **WHEREAS**, the Highlands Development Credit Bank Board has made offers to
20 purchase credits from 82 properties, including 20 properties that have landowners meeting
21 the hardship criteria under the initial HDC purchase program established in 2009 and an
22 additional 62 properties under the Highlands Development Credit Purchase Program adopted
23 by rule in April 2016; and

24 **WHEREAS**, of those, 70 landowners’ credits were purchased resulting in the
25 preservation of 2,565 acres while nine landowners chose not to proceed and three

26 applications were rescinded by the Bank Board, with no outstanding applications remaining to
27 complete; and

28 **WHEREAS**, of the 62 towns and six counties to apply for Highlands Regional Master
29 Plan conformance review, 55 municipalities and two counties have received approval from the
30 Highlands Council for their conformance plans; and

31 **WHEREAS**, the “Preserve New Jersey Act” has been amended in order to implement
32 the Corporate Business Tax revenue dedication for State fiscal year 2020 and beyond by
33 establishing funding allocations for the State’s existing open space, farmland, and historic
34 preservation programs, and the bill also extended to June 2024 the dual-appraisal valuation
35 eligibility for landowners in the Highlands that would have otherwise expired on June 30,
36 2019, and which allows appraisals for farmland preservation acquisitions in the Highlands to
37 be based on either current local zoning and environmental laws and regulations or those in
38 effect as of January 1, 2004 – whichever yields the higher value; and

39 **WHEREAS**, the Highlands Development Credit Bank Board has been researching the
40 use of a ‘Municipal Average’ valuation approach which could provide an alternative
41 methodology from the current use of “dual appraisal” for determining Farmland Preservation
42 Program easement values for qualified farm owners in the Highlands.

43 **NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED**, that we, the delegates to the 108th State
44 Agricultural Convention, assembled in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on February 8-9, 2023, urge
45 the Department to continue to monitor and contribute to the future implementation of the
46 Highlands TDR program and Plan Conformance process in order to maximize program
47 success and provide equity protection for affected landowners.

48 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that we support the TDR Conservation Restriction
49 developed in coordination with the Department and the Highlands Development Credit Bank
50 Board and approved by the Highlands Council.

51 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that we encourage the continued coordination
52 between the State TDR Bank and the HDC Bank Board to further the implementation of TDR

53 programs in the Highlands and statewide.

54 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that we support the Highlands Open Space
55 Partnership Funding and Highlands Development Credit Purchase Program that establish
56 programs for land acquisition and purchase of HDCs, initially funded through money received
57 by the Highlands Council as mitigation for linear utility projects.

58 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that we support the Department's involvement in the
59 Regional Master Plan (RMP) Monitoring Program to evaluate progress in achieving the goals
60 of the RMP through the implementation of its policies and programs.

61 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that we strongly urge the Governor, Senate President
62 and Assembly Speaker to consider the agricultural background, knowledge and/or experience
63 of any new potential Highlands Council members, as well as their residency, to ensure that
64 farmers in the preservation area – who are most directly affected by the RMP – have
65 additional representation on the Council.

66 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that we encourage the Governor to do a complete
67 independent review of the Highlands Act and its programs as to its effect on the Highlands
68 Region municipalities, economy and agricultural viability.

69 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that we urge the adoption of a contract purchaser
70 provision for Dual Appraisal for those landowners that have time constraints, must sell their
71 property immediately, and cannot wait for the development easement sale process, so that
72 once an application for preservation has been made, the sale of the property can take place
73 and the new owner can succeed to the Dual Appraisal rights of the previous owner.