Chairman Prieto and Members of the Committee. I thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Department of Agriculture’s budget with you today.

The Department’s mission encompasses four major goals: Promoting the state’s agricultural products and industry; ensuring healthy plants and animals for agriculture and consumers; preserving farmland and helping farmers conserve the natural resources that are so vital for their operations and to the public’s well-being; and ensuring nutritious, healthful school lunch and breakfast programs, as well as other community feeding programs, such as The Emergency Feeding Assistance Program, or TEFAP.
The Garden State’s diverse agricultural landscape changes from region to region and even from farm to farm within each sector – with major concentrations of fruit and vegetable operations in the South, an array of horticultural operations dispersed throughout the state, the dairy farms of our northwestern and southwestern corners, the equine operations in the central and northeastern counties, or the bustling aquaculture and fishing of our coastal areas. Each looks to the Department for divergent resources in order to remain a major contributor to the state’s economy and for programs that afford protection to our citizens.

This past year, our farmers faced severe weather patterns that culminated with Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee in August and September.
Those storms, and the heavy rainfalls in the weeks leading up to them, tested our state’s agricultural operators as they dealt with flooded fields, damaged crops and challenges in getting adequate drinking water to parched livestock.

Those storms also tested the Department’s capabilities to help not only farmers and agricultural operations, but all domestic and farm animals of this state and their owners, as well as all the people who were forced by floodwaters to leave their homes and live in shelters.

For the first time ever, NJDA had to mass-activate its plan for moving thousands of pounds of surplus food from our state’s two USDA warehouses to shelters, where volunteers from emergency feeding operations prepared it for evacuees. This cooperation among state, federal and non-profit organizations was successful in feeding displaced residents for nearly a week until they were able to return home.
The storms also tested the soundness of the Department’s plans to ensure that pets and other animals are not abandoned when disaster strikes. Our network of County Animal Response Teams, our “CARTs,” which are coordinated at the ROIC through the Department’s Division of Animal Health, was highly successful in moving larger animals to safer ground and in ensuring that pet-friendly shelters were available for those who would otherwise not leave their homes for fear of what would happen to the pets left behind.

In a highly urbanized state like New Jersey, with nearly 9 million people in our own state and a close-in market of millions more in many large, nearby cities, New Jersey needs every bit of agricultural production it can muster, so that the advantages of that diverse marketplace can benefit our farmers and the bounty of our farms can nourish our citizenry.
Each year, the consuming public turns more and more to our local farmers and fishermen to provide more for their needs. The Department’s challenge is to support our state’s agricultural operators to ensure they can meet that consumer demand and be as successful as possible. We meet that challenge by being a more-nimble, smarter, more efficiently managed workforce.

Our constant commitment to cross-training employees and working with partners in the agricultural industry and academia helps stretch state dollars beyond what they merely might be able to pay for in a less-creative environment.

Due to the constrained state budgets of recent years, we have accessed more federal resources to accomplish our mission. However, we anticipate that the budget issues that have arisen in Washington will result in fewer federal resources in many areas.
This requires us to be even more creative about electronic-based interaction with our constituents, like our web-site, our web-based payment systems for school food-service operators or real-time communications, including social media for both our industry partners and our state’s residents.

The recent years of down economic times have meant that more and more New Jersey residents depend upon our community feeding programs that serve those who otherwise would go hungry. By leveraging the State Food Purchase Program, in which state funds are used to buy food for those community feeding programs, we keep the money spent on those items here in New Jersey, and at the same time bolster our farm economy.

New Jersey continues to be a national leader in agricultural marketing. We are among the Top-10 agricultural states in the production of nursery stock, blueberries, cranberries, tomatoes, bell peppers, peaches and more.
We also have been successful, from the supermarket to the farmers market, with the “Jersey Fresh” brand and the newer, related brands like “Jersey Grown” and “Jersey Seafood.” Retailers of all kinds – from high-end supermarkets to community farmers markets to restaurants – leverage our state funds through the marketing chain to promote New Jersey products. When retailers spend their own money to put the “Jersey Fresh” or other brand logos in their advertising circulars, they leverage promotional funds into far more exposure to consumers than we as a Department can afford.

We’ve also expanded our “Jersey Fresh” and “Jersey Grown” brands through “Made With” items. The “Made With Jersey Fresh” items, using produce, dairy and meat in frozen or canned foodstuffs, help keep our farmers’ bounty on people’s tables longer through the year, and the “Made With Jersey Grown” items include birdhouses and wreaths made with New Jersey wood and plant materials.
The growing emphasis on developing rural-to-urban food systems has resulted in partnerships with other state and federal agencies to connect rural farmers with existing urban food processors, opportunities to create new food-processing facilities, and inroads at established or new retail and restaurant operations. These all benefit the farmer, creating new, nearby markets for their products. And they benefit the urban areas through the creation of new jobs.

In addition to the work that directly helps farmers, the Department is equally committed to its protection responsibilities – whether helping to feed those who are nutritionally at risk; working to eradicate invasive insect pests or plant and animal diseases; or conserving farmland and other natural resources.

Some of our missions require very specialized knowledge and expertise.
New Jerseyans have become familiar over the past several years with the Brown Marmorated Stink Bug, an invasive pest. The explosion in the stinkbug’s population has resulted in it now becoming a major crop pest as well as a nuisance to homeowners, as it searches out food sources of any kind. We are currently raising a colony of them at the Insect Lab so that we can determine the most effective beneficial insects to combat the stinkbug and reduce its population.

We expect this summer to declare our second Asian longhorned beetle infestation as completely eradicated. ALB is a major destroyer of trees, particularly maples, which make up a significant portion of our urban shade trees. Just as we did in the earlier, smaller Hudson County infestation, we have been surveying for five years in the Middlesex/Union County area. More than 20,000 infested and potential host trees were removed, and we have found no indication of the beetle still existing there.
Our Divisions of Animal Health and Plant Industry, working in conjunction with the Department of Health and Senior Services, have moved into the new laboratory building in Ewing, and are now better equipped to detect and respond to diseases like avian influenza, brucellosis and tuberculosis so they don’t become established in animal populations, giving them the opportunity to make the jump to humans.

We also can better detect mycotoxins – toxic substances produced by types of mold – that can concentrate in field grains after heavy rainfall. We can do more to keep them from making their way into our human or animal food streams.

The Department also is heavily engaged in helping farmers be good stewards of the resources they depend upon for their livelihoods and our residents depend upon for a good quality of life.
The Department is in the final stages of publishing changes to the Chapter 251 Standards as required by the Soil Restoration law. These regulations address soil disturbances related to construction activities that are greater than 5000 square feet, and were the result of the Department leading a team of federal and state officials, university researchers and industry representatives in developing guidelines for the improvement of soil quality.

Keeping farmers working the land also means making sure that farmland remains available to do so. With the release of $73 million in farmland preservation monies approved by voters in 2009, the Farmland Preservation program continues to move toward the long-term goal of maintaining an agricultural landscape in the Garden State that includes a minimum of 500,000 tillable acres.
The Department remains committed to maximizing and leveraging its available resources – whether they are in the form of funding, partnership opportunities or the ability to adapt our workforce to whatever work is needed – in order to foster a strong and sustainable agricultural industry and to support the health, welfare and nutritional needs of the citizens of New Jersey.

I’d be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time, and I thank you again for this chance to discuss our budget.

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