

New Jersey Highlands Council **Letter 97**

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As a human I am a water drinker. As a resident of Bergen County I rely on the State of NJ to protect the resources that allow me to drink clean water every day, as well as use water for other purposes. Our state is lucky to have a large amount of annual rainfall, especially in the Highlands area. The Highlands Act helps to keep our water resources at the necessary quantity and quality for life in NJ. The ecosystem of the Highlands is interdependent and inseparable. This comment process required me to categorize my comments. While this may help your organization in assessment, it ignores the fact that issues addressed by the Highland Act are interdependent. Further, they will be effected by climate change and the Highlands Council needs to consider climate effects in their work. • The Highlands Act requires the Department of Environmental Protection to establish regulations to "ensure that existing water quality shall be maintained, restored, or enhanced." The Council needs to ensure the DEP follows through with this requirement but not do it for them. • Surface water and ground water are interconnected systems. Protection of streams, lakes, and the land areas that keep these water resources viable is imperative. • The Council should establish, maintain, and make available an inventory of all Highlands Open Waters and their integrity as specified in the RMP, including the Watershed Resource Values of each Highlands HUC14 watershed. This inventory should reflect whether waters listed by the Clean Water Act are restored. • Forestry is a critical activity and should be addressed through the RMP Conformance Process, either by the requirement of a model ordinance or resolution developed by the Highlands Council. • The best method to protect core forests from inappropriate projects is to require that all proposed projects meet Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification standards. • The Highlands RMP must maintain, if not increase, the existing 1000 foot buffer for vernal pools. The Highlands Council has already mapped the vernal pools and their buffers, but more needs to be done at the state and municipal levels to ensure their continued protection. • The Critical Wildlife Habitat overlay in the RMP is incredibly useful, but is subjective. Although DEP has an existing list of identified T&E species, projects are proposed and no mitigation is offered because too few of these species are identified during the planning process. Surveys should be conducted by experts for each taxon and should be repeated over at least two full years during all appropriate seasons. Once all occurrences of rare flora and fauna at a proposed development site have been quantified, existing populations of rare flora and fauna must be avoided. • Protection of large tracts of contiguous forests in the Highlands is directly related to mitigating the effects of climate change. Recent research has revealed that more mature forests with larger trees sequester greater amounts of carbon. • The Council should address the effects of Climate Change by lessening the impacts to the region's core forests. In addition to prioritizing forest land preservation, using the Forest Stewardship Council's third-party certification guidelines to regulate forestry and linear development projects is the best way to ensure that core forests remain intact. • An Energy section should be added to the RMP to better address climate change concerns. • Linear development projects and existing linear resources have a major detrimental effect on the Highlands ecosystems. More stringent requirements should be implemented in the RMP for linear projects. • The updated RMP should give strong encouragement that the Highlands Council be included as a participant in all inter-agency decisions involving the use of dedicated open space funds made available through public referendum or as a consequence of legal settlements, regulatory fines, mitigation contributions, etc. in the region.

Respondent

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