

A photograph of a wooden boardwalk trail winding through a forest. The trail is made of wide wooden planks and is surrounded by dense green and yellow foliage. The trees are tall and thin, and the ground is covered in fallen leaves and pine needles. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

New Jersey Highlands
Water Protection and Planning Council
ANNUAL REPORT 2025

Allamuchy Pond Trail, Allamuchy Township

All photos by Highlands Council staff except where noted.

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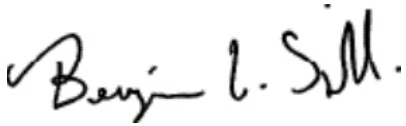


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Executive Director Certification

As required by State Executive Order #37, all State authorities are required to certify that during the preceding year, the authority has, to the best of its knowledge, followed all of the authority's standards, procedures, and internal controls. I hereby certify to the best of my knowledge that, during the 2025 calendar year, all of the Council's standards, procedures, and internal controls were followed.



Benjamin L. Spinelli, Esq.

Executive Director

New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council

Please note that Highlands Council financial reporting follows a Fiscal Year that begins July 1 and ends June 30, while this 2025 Annual Report summarizes activities for the calendar year. For this reason, the Statement of Activities and Financial Report found on page vi, includes portions of both Fiscal Year 2025 and Fiscal Year 2026.

*Complete Highlands Council Financial Reports are available on the Highlands Council website.
www.nj.gov/njhighlands*



MIKIE SHERRILL
Governor

DR. DALE G. CALDWELL
Lieutenant Governor

State of New Jersey

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CARL J. RICHKO
Chairman

BENJAMIN L. SPINELLI, ESQ.
Executive Director

A Message from the Chairman and Executive Director

We are pleased to present the 2025 Annual Report of the New Jersey Highlands Council highlighting achievements from the past year. The work of the Highlands Council is vital for the future of the State of New Jersey as we have the responsibility of protecting the region’s resources thus safeguarding a primary drinking water supply for approximately 70% of the state’s residents.

On the pages of this report, you will read about the great strides made by the Council and its professional staff to carry out the mission of the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act in important areas such as agriculture, affordable housing, and economic sustainability. You’ll also learn about the eight Highlands municipalities that joined in the Regional Master Plan (RMP) conformance process, extending protections and assistance to large swaths of the Planning Area portion of the region, and meet the seven new Highlands Council members welcomed late in the year.

In addition to all the projects and programs outlined in this report, the Council also continued to build a working relationship with the City of Newark, the largest single landowner in the region and the largest single consumer of Highlands water, and engaged for the first time with the “Big Six” water purveyors who supply the state with over 860 million gallons of clean drinking water each day from the Highlands. All of these initiatives proceeded as the Council’s staff continued the important day-to-day work of planning the region’s future and protecting the resources that make it possible to supply the state with drinking water.

For all of the successes in the past year, there are still a number of challenges facing the Highlands. Nearly 230 square miles of the Highlands remains vulnerable to development, with no dedicated source of funding for land preservation. The Highlands Open Space and Recreation Plan discussed in this report will bring this matter into sharp focus and outline potential solutions. Similarly, as illustrated by the ongoing drought, climate change and its effects provide an ongoing threat that the Council is currently examining through development of a technical report discussed later in this report. And finally, as a result of inaction by prior administrations, the Council faces staffing and funding challenges that mean leaving important program areas unaddressed, including long-term initiatives like restoring resources that were degraded at the time of the Highlands Act.

Despite these hurdles, we remain steadfastly committed to protection of the New Jersey Highlands for the sake of all New Jersey residents.

Carl J. Richko, Chairman
Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council

Benjamin L. Spinelli, Esq., Executive Director
Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council

Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council

2025/2026

Carl J. Richko, Chairman
West Milford, Passaic County
Former Mayor,
West Milford Township

Kurt Alstede, Vice Chairman
Chester Township, Morris County
Founder, Alstede Farms
Former Councilman,
Chester Township

James A. Visioli, Treasurer
Dover, Morris County
Former Alderman,
Town of Dover

Mary J. Amoroso
Mahwah Township, Bergen County
Bergen County Commissioner

Tammy Koop
Belvidere, Warren County
Council Member, Belvidere

Joseph Basralian
Chatham Township, Morris County
Special Projects Manager,
New Jersey Conservation Foundation

Helen Le Frois
Newton, Sussex County
Mayor, Newton

Daniel T. Bush
Holland Township, Hunterdon County
Mayor, Holland Township

Melonie Marano
Green Brook Township, Somerset County
Somerset County Commissioner

Timothy P. Dougherty
Morristown, Morris County
Mayor, Morristown

Matthew Oswald
Riverdale Borough, Morris County
Council Member, Riverdale Borough

Bruce James
Clifton, Passaic County
Commissioner, Passaic County

Kelley Smith
Harmony Township, Warren County
Co-owner J-P Smith Farms, KelRick Farms,
and Star D Farm

William Kibler
Califon Borough, Hunterdon County
Executive Director,
Great Swamp Watershed Association

Dr. Daniel J. Van Abs
Princeton, Mercer County
Former Professor of Professional Practice for Water,
Society & Environment at Rutgers University, School
of Environmental and Biological Sciences

In Memoriam



Judge Michael R. Dressler who served on the Highlands Council for 14 years passed away December 4, 2025. Nominated to the Council by then-governor Chris Christie in 2011, Dressler was already an accomplished public servant when appointed to fill one of eight elected official positions on the Council. At 22, Dressler was elected to the Cresskill Council and later elected as the Borough's Mayor in 1983. He served as counsel to both the Bergen County Commissioners and the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority. In 1997 he was elected as the Bergen County Surrogate, a role he held until his passing.

As a member of the Highlands Council, Dressler served on numerous committees including: Audit Evaluation, Bylaws Review, Landowner Equity and Land Preservation, Personnel, Plan Conformance (Chair beginning 2018), and RMP Amendment. Judge Dressler also encouraged the formation of and served as Chair on the Roxbury Water Quality Committee, created in 2014 to address concerns regarding the former Fenimore Landfill. The Highlands Council is grateful for his contributions and commitment. He will be missed.

Protecting the New Jersey Highlands

The New Jersey Highlands region stretches from the banks of the Delaware River in Warren and Hunterdon counties to the New York State border along northern Sussex, Passaic, and Bergen counties. The Highlands region covers approximately 1,300 square miles and includes 88 municipalities and portions of seven counties (Bergen, Hunterdon, Morris, Passaic, Somerset, Sussex, and Warren).

Although the region covers less than 15% of the state's land area, 70% of the state's residents get some or all of their drinking water from the Highlands, including 8 out of every 10 people living in a designated Overburdened Community. For this reason, the New Jersey Highlands region requires special protection. Recognizing the significant natural, cultural, and agricultural value of the region, the State Legislature of New Jersey passed the **New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act** (Highlands Act) in 2004 to protect both the natural resources and the economic vitality of communities within the region.

This protection is achieved through a combination of regional planning and regulatory provisions administered jointly through implementation of the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP) and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Highlands Rules.

The Highlands Act established the **New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council** (Highlands Council) as a regional planning agency and charged it with the creation and adoption of a regional master plan to protect and enhance the natural resources within the New Jersey Highlands. The **Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP)** was adopted by the Highlands Council in 2008.

The Highlands Council works in partnership with municipalities and counties in the region to encourage a comprehensive regional planning approach to implementation of the Highlands Act. The RMP provides a framework for this implementation at the local level. Programs outlined in the RMP include the management of Natural Resources; Water Resources and Utilities; Agricultural Resources; Historic, Cultural, Archaeological and Scenic Resources; Transportation; Sustainable Economic Development; and Air Quality.

The RMP also outlines a program to guide municipalities and counties in the region through its implementation. Conformance with the RMP is required by the Highlands Act throughout the Preservation Area and is voluntary in the Planning Area. This process involves the revision of local planning and regulatory documents to integrate the land use provisions and resource management protections of the Highlands Act, so that those documents align with the goals, policies, and objectives of the RMP. Noncompetitive, no-match-required grant funding is available to support this work.

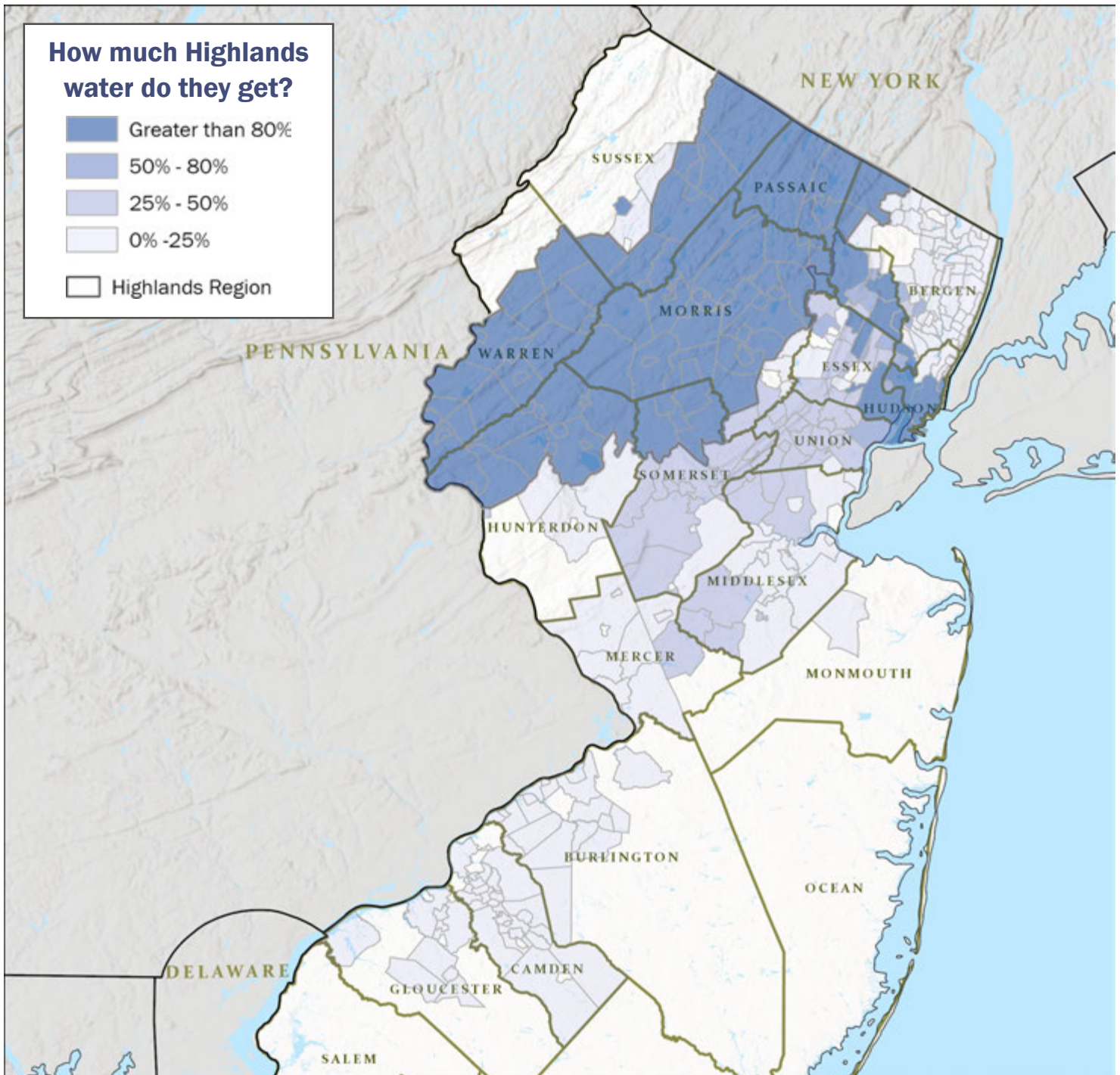
The Highlands Council does not issue permits, but is statutorily required to review certain proposed projects throughout the Highlands region for consistency with the Highlands Act and the RMP.



Charlotteburg Reservoir, owned and operated by the City of Newark and part of the Pequannock Watershed, lies on the border of three municipalities in two counties: West Milford Township in Passaic County, and Rockaway Township and Kinnelon Borough in Morris County.

Who drinks Highlands Water?

The Highlands region is a primary source of drinking water for New Jersey. More than 70% of New Jersey residents get some or all of their drinking water from the Highlands region, including 8 out of every 10 people living in a designated Overburdened Community. This map shows that Highlands water makes it as far south as Gloucester County. This is why protecting the New Jersey Highlands region is a matter of statewide importance.



Statement of Activities and Financial Report

period ending December 31, 2025

General Operating Budget FY25 - July 1, 2024 through June 30, 2025

Revenues

State of New Jersey Appropriation FY25	\$	3,066,000.00
Balance from FY24	\$	233,339.86
Miscellaneous Revenues & Reimbursements	\$	8,830.94
TOTAL	\$	3,308,170.80

Expenditures

Salaries	\$	2,397,420.07
Materials and Supplies	\$	24,533.20
Other Operating Expenses	\$	98,242.78
Rent, Maintenance and Repairs	\$	269,097.06
Equipment, Additions, and Improvements	\$	148,531.86
Balance through June 30, 2025	\$	370,345.83
TOTAL	\$	3,308,170.80

General Operating Budget for Portion of FY26 - July 1, 2025 through December 31, 2025

Revenues

State of New Jersey Appropriation FY26	\$	3,325,000.00
Balance from FY25	\$	370,345.00
Miscellaneous Revenues & Reimbursements	\$	5,000.00
TOTAL	\$	3,700,345.00

Expenditures

Salaries	\$	1,255,675.56
Materials and Supplies	\$	12,609.15
Other Operating Expenses	\$	48,218.74
Rent, Maintenance and Repairs	\$	130,957.58
Equipment, Additions, and Improvements	\$	44,524.62
Balance through June 30, 2026	\$	2,208,359.35
TOTAL	\$	3,700,345.00

Regional Master Plan Budget for Portion of FY26 - July 1, 2025 through December 31, 2025

Revenues

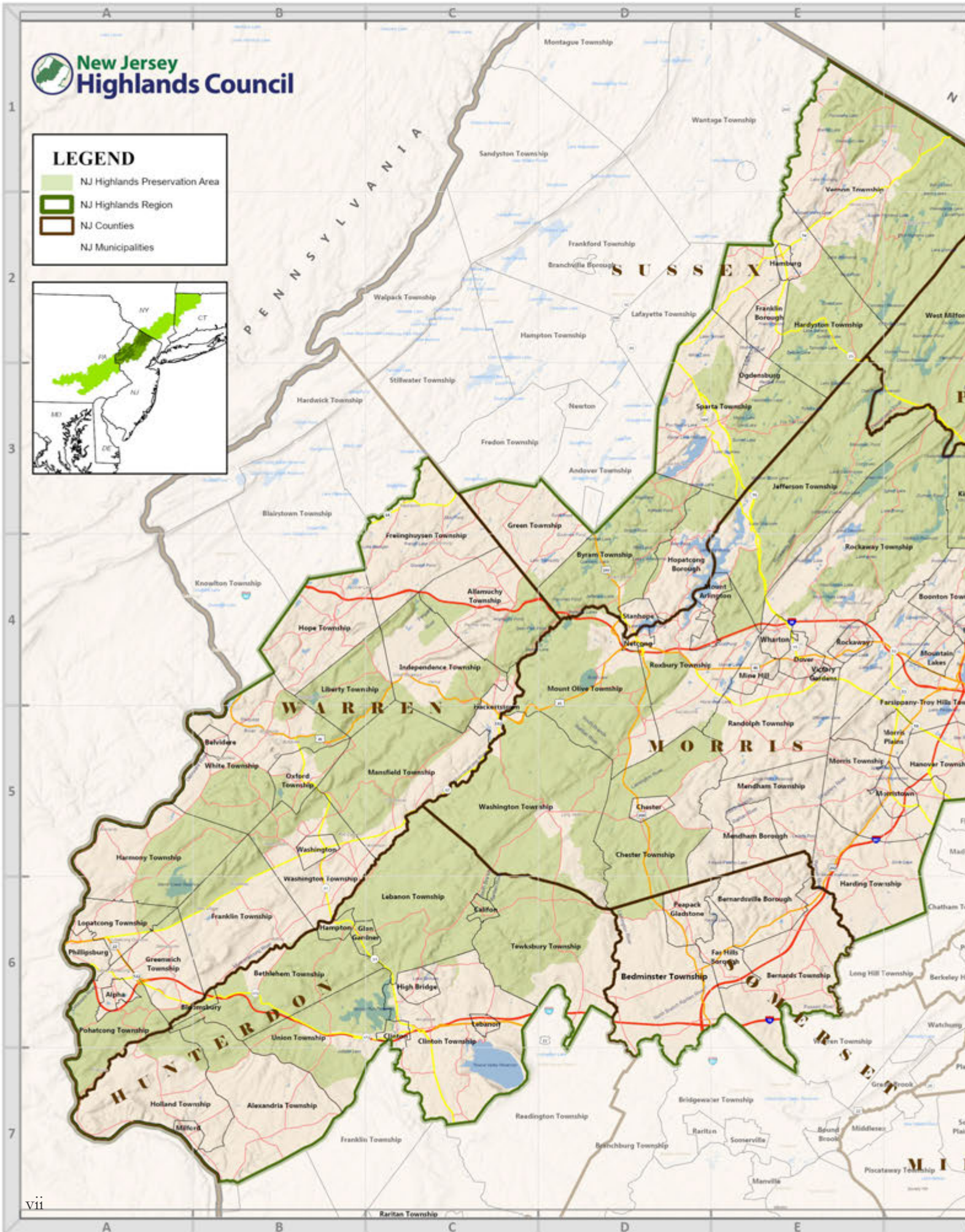
Balance from FY25	\$	2,943,976.71
Miscellaneous Revenues - Interest & Reimbursements	\$	50,000.00
TOTAL	\$	2,993,976.71

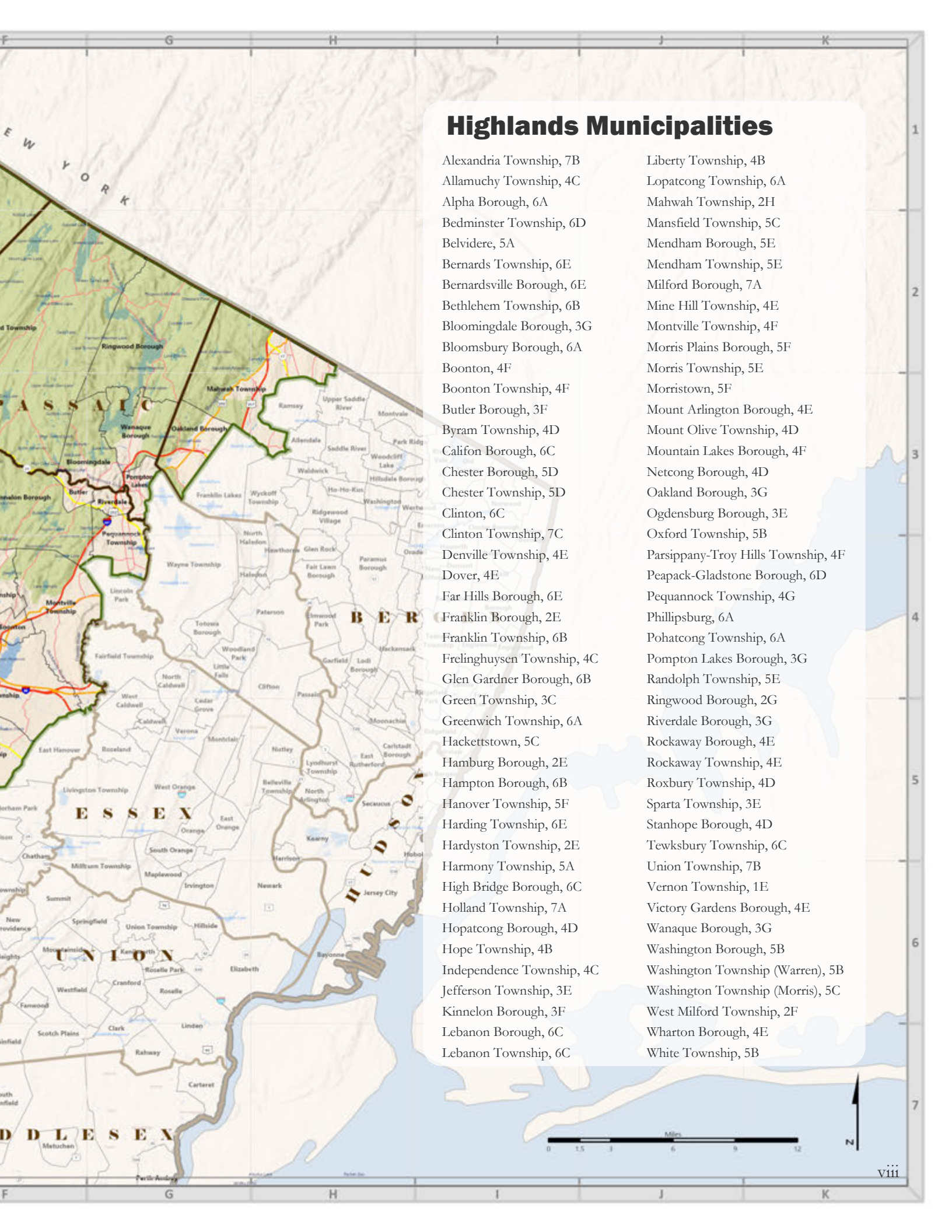
Expenditures

Contracts Paid to Date	\$	236,651.68
Balance on Approved Contracts	\$	1,173,228.41
Balance through June 30, 2026	\$	1,584,096.62
TOTAL	\$	2,993,976.71

LEGEND

-  NJ Highlands Preservation Area
-  NJ Highlands Region
-  NJ Counties
-  NJ Municipalities





Highlands Municipalities

- Alexandria Township, 7B
- Allamuchy Township, 4C
- Alpha Borough, 6A
- Bedminster Township, 6D
- Belvidere, 5A
- Bernards Township, 6E
- Bernardsville Borough, 6E
- Bethlehem Township, 6B
- Bloomington Borough, 3G
- Bloomsbury Borough, 6A
- Boonton, 4F
- Boonton Township, 4F
- Butler Borough, 3F
- Byram Township, 4D
- Califon Borough, 6C
- Chester Borough, 5D
- Chester Township, 5D
- Clinton, 6C
- Clinton Township, 7C
- Denville Township, 4E
- Dover, 4E
- Far Hills Borough, 6E
- Franklin Borough, 2E
- Franklin Township, 6B
- Frelinghuysen Township, 4C
- Glen Gardner Borough, 6B
- Green Township, 3C
- Greenwich Township, 6A
- Hackettstown, 5C
- Hamburg Borough, 2E
- Hampton Borough, 6B
- Hanover Township, 5F
- Harding Township, 6E
- Hardyston Township, 2E
- Harmony Township, 5A
- High Bridge Borough, 6C
- Holland Township, 7A
- Hopatcong Borough, 4D
- Hope Township, 4B
- Independence Township, 4C
- Jefferson Township, 3E
- Kinnelon Borough, 3F
- Lebanon Borough, 6C
- Lebanon Township, 6C
- Liberty Township, 4B
- Lopatcong Township, 6A
- Mahwah Township, 2H
- Mansfield Township, 5C
- Mendham Borough, 5E
- Mendham Township, 5E
- Milford Borough, 7A
- Mine Hill Township, 4E
- Montville Township, 4F
- Morris Plains Borough, 5F
- Morris Township, 5E
- Morristown, 5F
- Mount Arlington Borough, 4E
- Mount Olive Township, 4D
- Mountain Lakes Borough, 4F
- Netcong Borough, 4D
- Oakland Borough, 3G
- Ogdensburg Borough, 3E
- Oxford Township, 5B
- Parsippany-Troy Hills Township, 4F
- Peapack-Gladstone Borough, 6D
- Pequannock Township, 4G
- Phillipsburg, 6A
- Pohatcong Township, 6A
- Pompton Lakes Borough, 3G
- Randolph Township, 5E
- Ringwood Borough, 2G
- Riverdale Borough, 3G
- Rockaway Borough, 4E
- Rockaway Township, 4E
- Roxbury Township, 4D
- Sparta Township, 3E
- Stanhope Borough, 4D
- Tewksbury Township, 6C
- Union Township, 7B
- Vernon Township, 1E
- Victory Gardens Borough, 4E
- Wanaque Borough, 3G
- Washington Borough, 5B
- Washington Township (Warren), 5B
- Washington Township (Morris), 5C
- West Milford Township, 2F
- Wharton Borough, 4E
- White Township, 5B



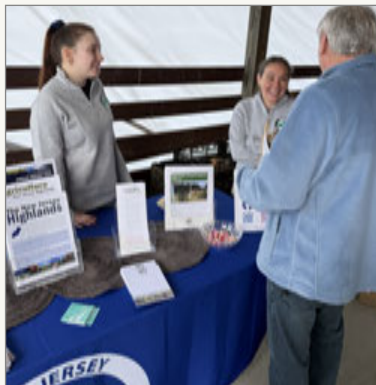
2025 snapshots



Highlands Science Symposium. Highlands Council Senior Resource Management Specialist Carolyn Klaube (pictured) along with the Highlands Council Science staff partnered with Kean University to develop and host a Highlands Science Symposium at the Kean Skylands Campus in Jefferson Township. **See story page 11.**

Chattin' it up with constituents

...and learning about Alpacas!
Can't think of a better way to spend a Saturday. Highlands Council staff always enjoy attending the Sussex County Harvest Honey and Garlic Festival in September.



Native Crop? The Highlands Council offices are located on property that was once the epicenter of innovation in telephonic technology. This “field” of telephone poles located on the property dates back to the 1960s, when they were “planted” by scientists at Bell Laboratories to test different types of wood and treatments, under real-world environmental conditions. During the 2025 Pick-Your-Own season, an anonymous prankster planted these signs along the road.

NEW JERSEY



Highlands

you never knew Jersey.

A brand for the NJ Highlands Region! 2025 saw the completion of the Highlands region brand and marketing plan and the launch of a cohesive identity for the New Jersey Highlands region. **See story page 13.**



Improving Site Inspections. Highlands GIS Specialist Weston Strubert and Resource Management Specialist Alex Hascha testing a new data collection method to support inspections of Highlands Council protected lands.



Take Your Child to Work Day 2025. Highlands Council staff hosted 10 youngsters on April 24 for Take Your Child to Work Day. Students ranging from elementary to middle-school age participated in science, planning, and GIS activities that helped them better understand the work their parents are engaged in every day.

By the Numbers

\$1.8 million
in reimbursements

to Highlands municipalities and counties for RMP implementation projects.

See story page 3.

\$1.7 million
in grant awards

to Highlands municipalities and counties for RMP implementation projects.

See story page 4.

\$270,000
to support **Agricultural Sustainability** projects in the Highlands.

See story page 19.

nearly
\$100,000
to support **Tourism Expansion** projects in the Highlands.

See story page 14.

Funding Local Priorities

Every year municipalities and counties throughout the Highlands region, just like local governments everywhere, examine priorities, set goals, and put together budgets to meet those goals. For those working with the Highlands Council, many of the tasks ordinarily funded by municipal and county planning budgets can instead be paid for by the Highlands Council because those tasks also help implement the Highlands Act and Regional Master Plan (RMP). Funding for these types of grants comes from the Highlands Protection Fund, which was created as part of the Highlands Act and is sustained by an allocation from the realty transfer fee.

This plan conformance grant process begins with discussions between a municipality or county and Highlands Council staff to review

needs and goals. A specific request is then made and presented to the full Highlands Council for approval by resolution. Once approved, a detailed scope of work is developed, reviewed and approved by Highlands Council staff. A grant agreement is then formalized and work begins. Final project deliverables must be reviewed and approved by Highlands Council technical staff before invoices can be submitted for reimbursement.

Since this grant program was established, the Highlands Council has provided 78 municipalities and six counties with reimbursements totaling \$11.3 million for activities that help advance the goals of the Highlands Act and RMP. Following is a summary of reimbursements and awards made to Highlands municipalities and counties in 2025. 💧

2025 Reimbursements

In 2025, the Highlands Council provided more than \$1.8 million to 26 municipalities and 4 counties in the region for completion of projects that help implement the RMP. Below is a summary of 2025 reimbursements by project type.

Project Type	Total Reimbursements
Lake and Stream Management	\$ 443,865
Watershed Management	\$ 296,803
Housing Element and Fair Share Plan, Buildout Analysis	\$ 189,163
Open Space, Recreation, and Trails Planning	\$ 177,586
Stormwater Management/MS4 Permit Compliance	\$ 128,244
Historic Preservation Planning	\$ 127,212
Sustainable Economic Development Planning	\$ 119,695
Master Plan Rexamations and Updates	\$ 115,518
RMP Conformance Assessments and Petition Preparation	\$ 81,962
Transportation Planning	\$ 70,510
Water Use and Conservation Management Plans	\$ 54,040
Economic Sustainability Planning	\$ 27,156
Natural Resource Inventory	\$ 24,300
Wastewater Management Plan	\$ 20,223
Farmland Preservation Planning	\$ 12,500
TOTAL	\$ 1,878,777

Notes: Table summarizes reimbursements that took place in 2025; project work may have been completed in prior years, and reimbursements could be for partial or draft project deliverables. Figures have been rounded to nearest dollar.

2025 Awards

In 2025, the Highlands Council approved nearly \$1.8 million in grants to 22 municipalities and 2 counties. Below is a summary of 2025 awards by project type.

Project Type	Total Award
Lake Management Planning	\$ 543,944
Stormwater Management/MS4 Permit Compliance	\$ 399,750
Open Space and Recreation Plans, Trail Planning	\$ 219,650
Housing Element & Fair Share Plan	\$ 131,000
Highlands Center Planning	\$ 102,500
Water Use and Conservation Management Planning	\$ 84,000
Climate Hazard Vulnerability Assessment	\$ 44,000
Implementing Ordinance Development/Updates	\$ 35,500
Environmental Resource Inventory	\$ 34,500
Master Plan Update	\$ 34,000
RMP Conformance Assessment	\$ 33,000
Agricultural Retention and Farmland Preservation	\$ 25,000
Zoning Map and Ordinance Updates	\$ 25,000
Highlands Land Use Ordinance	\$ 20,000
Forestry Plan	\$ 10,000
TOTAL	\$ 1,741,844

Notes: Table summarizes awards made in 2025; grants are reimbursement based and require Highlands Council staff review and approval of project scopes and deliverables.

Municipalities and Counties that were reimbursed or awarded funding from the Highlands Council in 2025

Allamuchy Township	Belvidere Township	Bethlehem Township
Byram Township	Califon Borough	Chester Township
Clinton Town	Clinton Township	Denville Township
Green Township	Harding Township	High Bridge Borough
Hopatcong Borough	Hope Township	Jefferson Township
Lebanon Township	Mahwah Township	Mendham Borough
Mendham Township	Milford Borough	Montville Township
Morristown	Mount Arlington	Mount Olive
Mountain Lakes	Netcong Borough	Parsippany-Troy Hills
Pohatcong Township	Roxbury Township	Tewksbury Township
Union Township	Vernon Township	Washington Township (Warren)
West Milford	Passaic County	Somerset County
Morris County	Hunterdon County	

Expanding RMP Alignment

Eight Petitions Approved in 2025

Municipal and county governments play a critical role in implementation of the Highlands Act through “plan conformance.” This process involves the revision of local planning and regulatory documents to integrate the land use provisions and resource management protections of the Highlands Act, so that those documents align with the goals, policies, and objectives of the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP).

In broad brush strokes, the steps to conformance include: 1) Municipal or county self-assessment; 2) Petition preparation, review, and approval; and 3) Local implementation/ adoption. When certain ordinances are adopted during the implementation phase, municipalities are considered to be fully conforming with the RMP. The Highlands Council provides no-match-required grant funding to support

planning, engineering, and design costs incurred along every phase of this process.

In 2025, the Highlands Council approved eight petitions for plan conformance. What’s particularly notable about these petitions is that all eight involve the planning area of the Highlands Region where conformance with the Highlands RMP is not required. Voluntary alignment of land use and other provisions of the Act and RMP by municipalities in the Planning Area is an essential part of successfully protecting the state’s water supply.

With approved petitions these municipalities move into the local implementation phase and are now eligible for additional grant funding to support a variety of municipal tasks as described in each profile.

Allamuchy Township, Warren County

Allamuchy Township sits in the northeastern corner of Warren County, bordering Byram Township, Sussex County to the northeast and Mount Olive Township, Morris County just across the Musconetcong River, which forms Allamuchy’s southeastern border. Characterized by abundant farmland, more than 40% of the township is being actively used for agricultural purposes. Allamuchy is also home to Allamuchy Mountain State Park and historic Rutherford Hall. The Township was already conforming for the Preservation Area portion of the municipality and in October 2025 the Highlands Council approved Allamuchy’s petition to add its Planning Area land. The approved implementation plan includes a Highlands Master Plan Element, an Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI), a Zoning Update Map Amendment, and planning for open space goals implementation. 💧



Silos at Riverside Greenhouses, Allamuchy Township

Town of Belvidere, Warren County

The Town of Belvidere in Warren County sits at the western edge of the New Jersey Highlands along the Delaware River. The County seat of Warren County, Belvidere is characterized by a number of historic buildings, many serving as administration buildings including the County courthouse, which faces a central square. A number of Victorian era homes surround the square and the adjacent neighborhoods, with a rural agricultural landscape stretching beyond the downtown area. Belvidere is located entirely within the Planning Area of the Highlands. Belvidere petitioned the Highlands Council for designation of the entire municipality as a Highlands Center. The petition was approved at the July Highlands Council meeting, with plans for the town to work on a Master Plan



Garret D. Wall Park (town square), Belvidere

Element and Re-examination Report, Comprehensive Center Planning, stormwater management planning, an Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI), and a Housing Element and Fair Share Plan. 💧

Jefferson Township, Morris County

Jefferson Township is located in the northwestern section of Morris County and the northcentral part of the Highlands region. A largely rural residential community, Jefferson enjoys a great deal of preserved land, which accounts for approximately 65% of the township's total land area. The township is home to Mahlon Dickerson Reservation and the Rockaway River Wildlife Management Area, and also contains the most shoreline of Lake Hopatcong among the four municipalities that border the lake. The township is bisected by Route 15 which supports a strong commercial core. In 2014, the Highlands

Council approved a petition from Jefferson Township to bring its local planning and regulatory documents into alignment with the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP), for the Preservation Area portion of the municipality. In June 2025, the Highlands Council approved Jefferson's petition to add the Planning Area portion of the township. The implementation plan accompanying the approval includes a Master Plan Re-examination Report and Highlands Element, Highlands Center Feasibility Study, Housing Element and Fair Share Plan, and an Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI). 💧



Weldon Pond, Jefferson Township

Mendham Township, Morris County

The Township of Mendham, located in southern Morris County, is primarily a residential community with significant sensitive land, and distinct rural and historic characteristics. The township is home to Lewis Morris Park along its eastern border with Harding and Morris Townships, and also contains part of Schiff Nature Preserve in the southwest. In all, approximately one-third of the township is preserved land. Mendham Township is located entirely within the Planning Area



of the Highlands region. Mendham Township petitioned the Highlands Council for plan conformance and in October 2025, the petition was approved. The implementation plan accompanying the approval includes a Master Plan Re-examination Report and Highlands Element, an Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI), stormwater management planning, a Housing Element and Fair Share Plan, and an Agricultural Retention and Farmland Preservation Plan. 💧

Mount Arlington Borough, Morris County



Municipal Beach, Mount Arlington

Council approved Mount Arlington's petition to add the Planning Area land. The implementation plan includes a Master Plan Re-examination Report, a Highlands Element, an Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI), a Center Feasibility Study, stormwater management planning, and a Lake Management Study for Lake Rogerene. 💧

Stretching from the southeastern shores of Lake Hopatcong to Route 80, Mount Arlington Borough is a small suburban residential community in Morris County. The borough includes quite a bit of preserved land mostly in the northern part of the borough, with a commercial area in the south centered around the Village Center, Howard Boulevard, and the Route 80 interchange. The Mount Arlington Train Station just south of Route 80 connects the region by train and bus. In 2011, the Highlands Council approved a petition from Mount Arlington to bring its local planning and regulatory documents into alignment with the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP), for the Preservation Area portion of the municipality only. The Highlands Council has since provided funding to the borough to support several planning initiatives. In October 2025, the Highlands

Netcong Borough, Morris County

Nestled on the shores of Lake Musconetcong, Netcong Borough is a small municipality in western Morris County, less than one square mile in size. The Borough is one of just 35 designated Transit Villages in the State, served by two NJ Transit rail lines connecting to Hackettstown and Hoboken, as well as Lakeland Bus lines to the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan. The entire municipality is located in the Planning Area of the

Highlands. Netcong petitioned the Highlands Council for designation of the entire municipality as a Highlands Center. The petition was approved at the April 2025 Highlands Council meeting, with plans for the borough to work on Highlands Center Planning, studies related to lake health, an Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI), and affordable housing requirements. 💧

Roxbury Township, Morris County

Roxbury Township in southwestern Morris County is known for its impressive trail systems, numerous municipal parks, and recreational opportunities. The southern end of Lake Hopatcong, the eastern shore of Lake Musconetcong, and the majority of Hopatcong State Park fall within the boundary of the municipality. In addition, a number of significant highways, including Interstate 80, as well as US 46 and NJ 10, travel through Roxbury providing robust commercial corridors. In 2013, the Highlands Council approved a petition from Roxbury Township to bring its local planning and regulatory documents into alignment with the Highlands RMP for the Preservation Area portion of the municipality. In July 2025, the Highlands



Berkshire Valley Wildlife Management Area

Council approved Roxbury's petition to add its Planning Area land. The implementation plan includes a Master Plan Re-examination Report, a Highlands Element, and an Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI). 💧

Union Township, Hunterdon County

Union Township in Hunterdon County enjoys a great deal of open space for a municipality bisected by the busy Interstate Highway 78. The township is home to Spruce Run Reservoir and the Clinton Wildlife Management Area surrounding it, as well as many other large tracts of preserved land. In 2022, the Highlands Council approved a petition from Union Township for conformance in the Preservation

Area portion of the township. In April 2025 the Highlands Council approved a petition to add the township's Planning Area land. The implementation plan accompanying the approval includes a Master Plan Re-examination Report, stormwater management planning, an Agricultural Retention and Farm Preservation Plan, and an Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI). 💧

Assisting Municipalities with Affordable Housing Plans and Challenges

At the beginning of 2025 the Highlands Council had already provided a solid foundation for municipalities in the region to meet the requirements of the 2024 Fair Housing Act. First and foremost, the Highlands Council had ensured that the resource mapping of the Highlands Land Use Capability Zones were included in the legislation, which meant they would be considered when calculating Round 4 affordable housing obligations. The Council then prepared Highlands-specific guidelines for developing fair share plans, developed a GIS-based buildout tool, and approved more than half-a-million dollars in grant funding to accomplish this work. The guidelines were adopted through the RMP amendment process, giving them the weight of administrative rules.

Council support in 2025 continued with staff working closely with municipal partners to help with the preparation and review of housing plans and related work. Grant funding, including \$131,000 in additional awards to four municipalities and \$189,163 in reimbursements to seven municipalities for completed housing element and fair share planning work, also continued.

The Council also provided extensive technical support, including working with the courts on challenges that were filed against affordable housing plans that had been adopted by municipalities following our guidance. Despite deftly balancing statutorily mandated affordable housing obligations and statutorily mandated obligations to protect the vital resources of the region, several Highlands towns found

themselves needing to respond to legal actions brought by entities that do not share that dual responsibility. When this occurred, the Highlands Council was present to support municipalities that had adopted plans deemed consistent with the Highlands RMP.

The economic pressure on the many smaller Highlands towns created by the costs of litigation often lead to settlements that are not consistent with the goals of the Highlands Act or the Highlands Regional Master Plan. This was evident during Round 3, where many properties that were inappropriate for intense development were included in settlements of challenges – without the guidance and input of the Highlands Council. Settlements of this nature placed Highlands resources, and the water supply for 70% of the state, at risk. This is the type of outcome that the Highlands Council is working closely with our conforming municipalities to avoid for Round 4 and beyond. 💧



Credit: Adobe Stock

Understanding Climate Change in the NJ Highlands

Climate impacts on the Highlands region have implications for the entire state. Increased temperatures and less predictable precipitation patterns will negatively affect the region's ability to serve as a primary source of drinking water and as a core agricultural asset for the state. Continued climate disruption will also alter the composition of Highlands forests, which play the leading role in protection of the region's water quality and quantity.

All the while, the region will still be called upon to export 860 million gallons of clean drinking water each day regardless of these changes; a number that will likely increase as the population of New Jersey continues to rise.

In October, the Highlands Council awarded a contract to Verdantas, LLC for the development of a Climate Change Technical Report for the Highlands region. The primary goal is to understand current and projected climate trends and what impact these trends may have, or may already be having, on Highlands resources. Extreme weather events, whether it be heavy

rainfall, extended periods of drought, an increased threat of wildfires or even inland impacts from tropical storms will become more frequent. The effects of these climate-driven occurrences need to be anticipated, understood and addressed. It is anticipated that the Technical Report will provide the foundation for a subsequent amendment to the Highlands RMP and inform the work of the Highlands Council going forward.

Specific project tasks in developing the report include: identifying current observed climate trends and future projections for the Highlands region; evaluating the impacts of identified trends and projections; and providing recommendations for adaptation and resilience. Project work will be done in consultation with a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) that will provide input on data collection, impacts assessments, and resilience recommendations.

The Highlands Council approved a not-to-exceed amount of \$110,000 for the project, which is expected to be completed before the end of 2026. 💧

2025: Drought Continues

Except for a brief period in June and July, the US Drought Monitor map showed most of the Highlands region was experiencing moderate to severe drought conditions throughout 2025. While a Drought Warning was declared for the entire state of New Jersey in December, the Highlands region is in the midst of a two-year period of below normal rainfall, including for the first time, a month where there was no recorded precipitation (October 2024). Reservoir levels continue to be dangerously low, which has led to draw down of back-up water sources such as Monksville Reservoir and Split Rock Reservoir along with reduced passing flows, which further diminishes water levels in the region's waterways.

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The lack of normal rainfall has been accompanied by extended periods of above-normal temperatures, which contribute to higher water usage and increased evaporation. The traditional response to drought has been to take measures to reduce water demand. This is not a demand problem. The protection of land from development and the restoration of degraded forests, wetlands, and streams in the region are the appropriate response. These actions will make the Highlands more resilient to the changes in precipitation patterns that climate change will continue to bring and enable the state to better tolerate periodic drought conditions.

The failure to invest in both the protection of the region's forests and wetlands, and taking measures to increase overall forest coverage and protect and enhance the wetlands and streams that contribute to the water supply, diminishes the region's resilience to changes in precipitation patterns. Ensuring that the region can supply the state's drinking water needs every day regardless of whether we are in a time of plentiful rainfall or a drought is dependent upon the condition of the natural resources of the Highlands. 💧

Highlands Council Partners with Kean University to Host Regional Science Symposium

First-of-its-kind event provides a platform for exchanging knowledge, fostering collaboration, and advancing research in the New Jersey Highlands

In March 2025, the Highlands Council, in partnership with Kean University, hosted a Highlands Region Science Symposium. The invitation-only event was held at Kean's Skylands Campus in Jefferson Township with an attendance of about 50 people, mostly comprised of researchers and environmental leaders. The symposium was a platform for exchanging knowledge, fostering collaboration, and advancing research in the Highlands ecosystem.

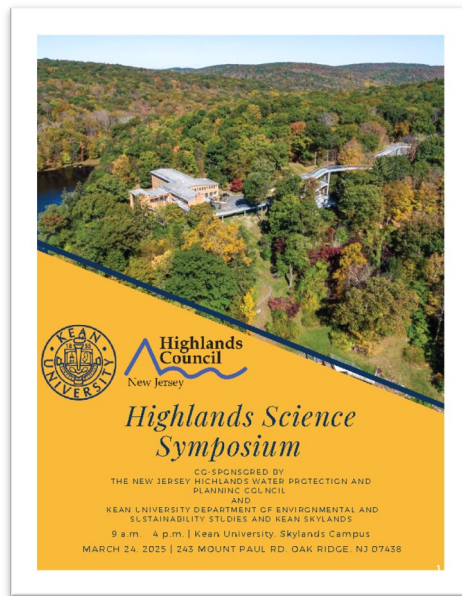
In addition to being the source of drinking water for 70% of New Jersey's residents, the Highlands region supports an important and unique ecosystem. However, the region also



Brian Zarate, a biologist with the NJDEP Endangered and Nongame Species Program presented data regarding turtle conservation in the New Jersey Highlands.

lacks an identity that draws interest from the scientific community. One of the purposes of this event was to raise the profile of scientific study in the Highlands within the academic community. Attracting the attention of scientists across multiple disciplines increases understanding of the natural systems within the region and can help guide efforts to protect them long into the future.

Topics of discussion included bird migration, ecological restoration, the impacts of invasive species, emerging pests and diseases, parasitic insects, and the increased threat of forest fires. Additionally, the effects of climate change on water quality were discussed. Presenters and panelists included Dr. Daniela Shebitz and Cailin O'Connor of Kean University, Jared Rosenbaum of Wild Ridge Plants, Jeremy Webber of the NJ Forest Fire Service, Kathy Hale of the NJ Water



Supply Authority, Deborah Kratzer of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Division of Water Monitoring, Standards and Pesticide Control, Kirk Raper of NJDEP's Division of Science and Research, and Dr. Meiyin Wu of Montclair State University, Dr. Eric Wiener of Ramapo College, Dr. Allyson Salisbury and Jean Ephiaphan of Rutgers University, and Dr.

Mike Van Clef of the NJ Invasive Species Strike Team.

The consensus among the scientists and academics attending the symposium was that the event was valuable and should be recurring. With significant assistance from students at Kean contributing to the success of the event, there was also discussion about the importance of engaging young people and college students in the scientific study and protection of the Highlands region. 💧



The second panel discussion of the day focused on Water Quality and Climate Change. Pictured left to right, Kathy Hale, Watershed Protection Specialist, New Jersey Water Supply Authority; Dr. Meiyin Wu, Director, New Jersey Center for Water Science and Technology Professor of Biology, Montclair State University; Deborah Kratzer, Environmental Scientist, NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP); Kirk Raper, Research Scientist, Division of Science and Research, NJDEP.

NEW JERSEY Highlands

you never Knew Jersey.

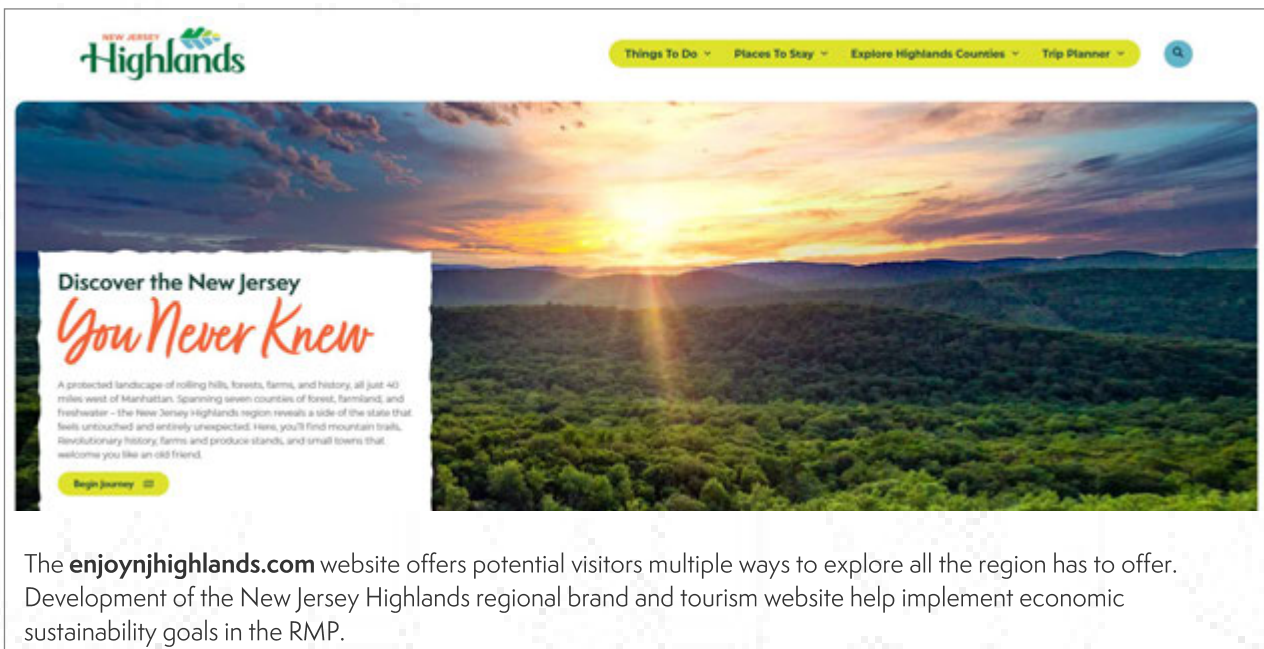
2025 saw the culmination of a significant Highlands Council economic sustainability effort with the completion of a regional branding and marketing plan and the launch of a tourism logo and tagline, enticing visitors to the region with a bit of a challenge – “you never Knew Jersey” until you’ve visited the New Jersey Highlands.

Rooted in a recommendation from the 2022 Highlands Region Economic Sustainability Plan, the branding and marketing initiative launched in 2024 with a goal to create a marketable regional identity that can be used by the municipalities, counties, and businesses of the Highlands to take advantage of the many incredible assets of the region. Raising awareness of the region in this way has the added benefit of building a sense of pride

among residents who will want to work harder to protect this region.

In June, the consulting firm leading this effort, North Star Place Branding and Marketing, presented their final report to the Highlands Council. Shortly after, the enjoynjhighlands.com page was live, with a landing page that invited visitors to get excited about what was coming. With the help of the Highlands Council’s Economic Sustainability County Coalition, assets were gathered for the website, which has since become a robust destination for prospective visitors.

Rollout of the Highlands region brand was and will continue to be aided by Highlands Council Tourism Expansion Grant recipients (see story next page). 💧



Highlands Tourism Expansion Grants

In January 2025, the Highlands Council introduced the Highlands Tourism Expansion Grant program. Stemming from a recommendation in the 2022 Highlands Economic Sustainability Plan, the Tourism Expansion Grant program is designed to support new or existing tourism initiatives that will benefit the regional economy. Applications for Tourism Expansion Grants were accepted on a rolling basis throughout the year.

Eligible applicants include Highlands region municipal and county governments, nonprofits,

business improvement districts (BIDs), and destination marketing organizations (DMOs). Awardees are required to incorporate the new Highlands region brand in their projects.

In 2025, eleven of these grants were awarded across the Highlands region, representing a total investment of \$400,000 to support local economies through tourism initiatives. The first awards were approved by the Highlands Council at its April public meeting, with additional awards made throughout the summer and fall. Brief summaries of each project follow below.

Town of Clinton. The Town of Clinton is leveraging Highlands Council funding to enhance the visitor experience in this well-established tourism destination in Hunterdon County. Improvements will include the conversion of information kiosks to serve as preliminary visitor centers, the installation of portable restroom facilities at two of the kiosks, and the addition of Highlands tourism branding throughout the downtown. Award amount, \$9,450.

The Growing Stage. This historic theater in downtown Netcong has truly embraced the value of being located in the heart of the New Jersey Highlands region. The theater has used the Highlands tourism brand as a platform for creating new partnerships to increase visitor traffic to not only the theater but also nearby businesses and other attractions. Award amount, \$35,000.

Hackettstown Business Improvement District (BID). The Hackettstown BID is establishing itself as a Highlands Brand Ambassador, encouraging visitors to explore beyond the town limits. Grant funding has also supported enhancements to well-established events in the town. Award amount, \$23,424.

Hunterdon County. A long-time partner with the Highlands Council, Hunterdon County is using Tourism Expansion Grant funding to expand its established and growing brand, “Explore Hunterdon” into new markets. Award amount, \$100,000.

Morris County Historical Society. The Morris County Historical Society intends to increase heritage tourism in and around Morris County by increasing offerings and expanding promotion of Acorn Hall and four established tourism events produced by the society. Award amount, \$35,000.

Morris County Economic Development Alliance (MCEDA). Highlands Council Tourism Expansion Grant funding is helping the MCEDA with its plans to mark the 250th Anniversary of the Signing of the Declaration of Independence. Award amount, \$100,000.

Ringwood Borough Tourism Initiative. Ringwood Borough plans to increase ecotourism by implementing recommendations from its 2024 Connecting Ringwood and Economic Sustainability Trails and Tourism plans. The Borough launched a summer concert series, established a social media presence, and began signing local trails. Award amount, \$35,000.

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Washington Borough Business Improvement District (BID). The Washington Borough BID leveraged funding from the Highlands Council to support its large, established Festival in the Borough in 2025. Award amount, \$10,000.

New York-New Jersey Trail Conference. The NY-NJ Trail Conference is enhancing Highlands Trail digital and on-trail information and connections with downtowns focusing on Jefferson, Ringwood, West Milford, and Vernon. Grant funding will also support development of Highlands Trail merchandise. Award amount, \$35,000.

Lake Hopatcong Wayfinding Improvements. The Borough of Hopatcong is working with the Lake Hopatcong Foundation (LHF) to develop a program that will increase ecotourism through enhancement to outdoor activity wayfinding on roadways, hiking trails, and kayak launch points around Lake Hopatcong. The project will facilitate the installation of signage on both foot trails and water trails, and support implementation of the Highlands region brand via an event-focused brand ambassadorship with the Borough of Hopatcong. Award amount, \$8,600.

Holland Township, Hunterdon County. Holland Township will enhance its annual Community Day, which in 2026 will focus on the nation’s semiquincentennial. Specifically, Highlands Council funding will help fund a “USA 250th Anniversary” fireworks display. As one of the few fireworks shows held annually in northern Hunterdon County, the event is expected to draw visitors from surrounding communities and introduce them to the area’s many attractions and the New Jersey Highlands brand. Award amount, \$8,500.

Reimbursements to funded projects totaled \$99,678 in 2025 with support going to the Town of Clinton, the Hackettstown BID, the Morris County Historical Society, the Morris County EDA, and the Washington Borough BID. Project work continues into 2026, as partnerships with BIDs, DMOs, and other organizations and businesses throughout the Highlands region grow. 💧



Highlands Council Tourism Expansion Grant Program Earns Industry Award

In December, the Highlands Council was recognized by the New Jersey Tourism Industry Association (NJTIA) with its 2025 President's Award. The award recognizes truly exceptional tourism efforts that stand out because of their regional or statewide impact. In presenting the award to the Highlands Council at NJTIA's Annual Conference, organization President Ben Rose noted that the Highlands Tourism Expansion Grant Program was an excellent example of collaboration among local DMOs and BIDs to historical societies and community organizations. 💧



Highlands Region OSRP Advances

In 2024, the Highlands Council launched a project to develop an Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) for the Highlands region. The Highlands OSRP will identify key properties, provide criteria for prioritizing acquisitions, distinguish between properties that are appropriate for either fee acquisition and those where conservation easements would be adequate, and identify financing needs and mechanisms. The project is funded in large part by a grant from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service under the federal Highlands Conservation Act grant program, and is being led by Trust for Public Land (TPL) and TwentyTwenty Public Affairs.

The project advanced considerably in 2025. Early in the year, a steering committee was assembled with representatives from national, state, and local government as well as non-governmental organizations working in the open space and land preservation field. The project team completed significant data analysis regarding existing preserved lands, open space, agriculture, and extensive stakeholder outreach

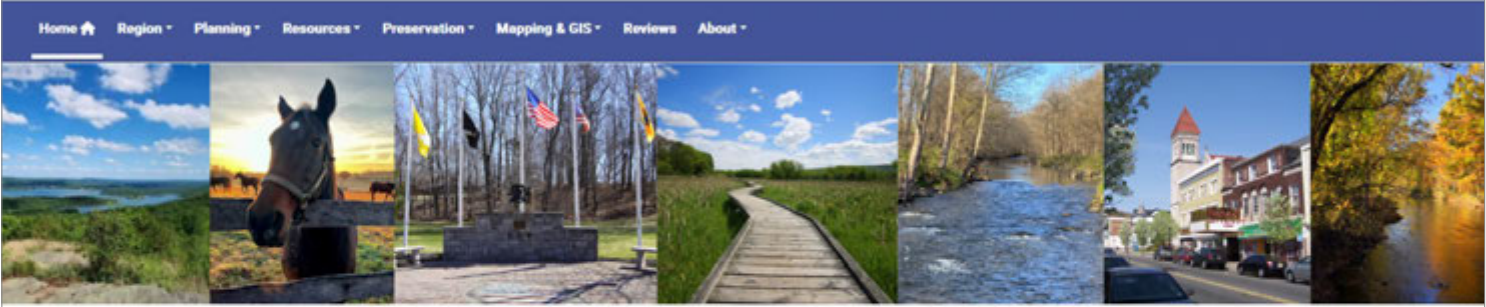
in the form of direct interviews as well as a general public survey.

Open for several months during the summer when outdoor recreation is top-of-mind, the survey yielded valuable insights regarding interest in available activities in the Highlands, interest in new activities, and the need for improved access, maintenance of sites, and an increase in open space and natural areas. Nearly 230 square miles of the Highlands region is currently undeveloped but developable. Having a plan that both identifies appropriate land for preservation and sets forth a strategy that includes a means of funding is essential to protect the region far into the future. Additional stakeholder engagement is planned as the project advances.

The final plan is expected to be completed in the first half of 2026. 💧

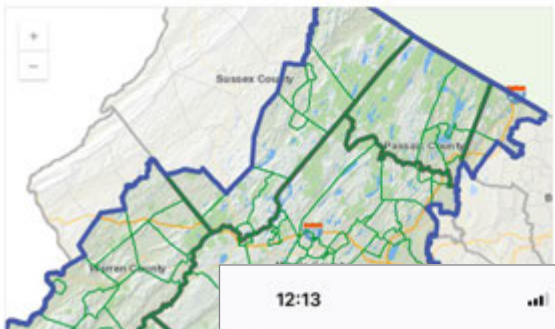


Social media graphic promoting OSRP public survey.



The New Jersey Highlands

The New Jersey Highlands region is a scenic and diverse area, encompassing 88 municipalities in parts of seven counties in northern New Jersey. **More than 70% of New Jersey residents get some or all of their drinking water from the Highlands, including 8 out of every 10 people living in a designated Overburdened Community.** For this reason, the region is protected by law. The 2004 New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act safeguards the New Jersey Highlands from excessive development and environmental degradation. The New Jersey Highlands Council is the state agency responsible for overseeing implementation of the Act. The agency is staffed by a team of professional planners,



A Refreshed Website for the Highlands Council

In late April the Highlands Council transitioned to an updated website. The new design is mobile-friendly and features a number of enhancements including an explorable homepage map that provides quick access to individual municipal pages and a revamped site architecture that seeks to present the work of the Highlands Council in a more user-centered context.

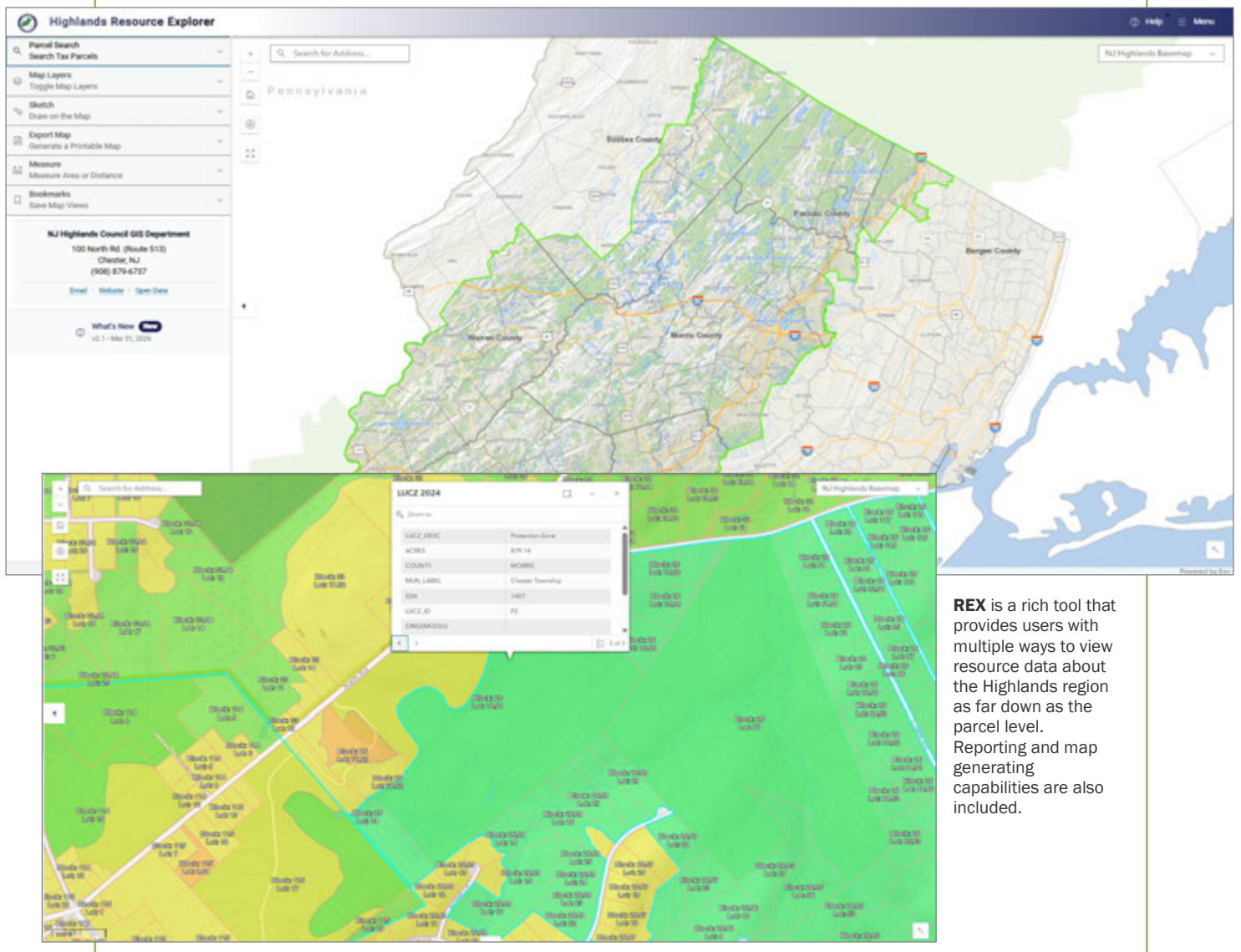
The site is available at the same address:
www.nj.gov/njhighlands.



Meet REX! the Highlands Resource Explorer

In May, the Highlands Council's online mapping capabilities got a significant upgrade. Because one of the key functions of the interactive map is to help users understand the region in the context of the many Highlands resources that are being protected, the Highlands Council's interactive map has been reimagined and relaunched as the Highlands Resource Explorer or 'REX' for short.

REX contains all the same functionality as its predecessor, but has an updated interface, improved response efficiency, and more mapping capabilities and opportunities for customization. Numerous help files are incorporated directly into REX and the Highlands Council GIS team is continually updating and improving the application. Find REX at: www.nj.gov/njhighlands/gis/REX/.



REX is a rich tool that provides users with multiple ways to view resource data about the Highlands region as far down as the parcel level. Reporting and map generating capabilities are also included.

Grant Updates: Sustainable Agriculture

Launched in 2023, the Highlands Sustainable Agriculture Grant Program was developed to support the farming community of the Highlands region by funding projects that are innovative, replicable, and aligned with the goals, policies, and objectives of the RMP. Projects selected for grant awards were approved for up to three years of funding, with projects commencing in 2024. Of the five projects originally funded, three continued to move forward in 2025 with reimbursements totaling \$271,069.

The **Foodshed Alliance** continued its successful Heritage Grains project providing farmers in the region with practical resources to help them introduce native grains and regenerative agriculture



FOODSHED ALLIANCE

practices into their operations. While year one of the project was focused on developing educational materials and outreach to established farms, year two focused on implementation with several farms in the Highlands

region. Year three will include continued recruitment of growers into the program, along with education regarding three major wholesale markets available in the Northeast: milling, distilling, and malting the grains. Farmers will also learn about highly profitable direct-to-consumer market options and selling to local bakeries, restaurants, and other food outlets.

The **Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Jersey (NOFA NJ)** has been working with multiple farmers in the region to demonstrate how organic farming can be profitable in the



New Jersey Highlands. In the first two years of grant funding from the Highlands Council, NOFA NJ collaborated with agricultural experts and farmers to host educational workshops, practice demonstrations, and Technical Assistance Provider (TAP) trainings. The program continues to evolve based on feedback from participants and NOFA NJ has identified three areas of need and interest for technical assistance among NJ producers that will be the focus of year three: agroforestry implementation, value-added processing, and adherence to land-use regulations and on-farm marketing.

City Green, Inc. has been leveraging Highlands Council funding to expand operations at their South Branch Preserve Farm. In 2025, City Green produced 69,700 pounds of organic produce at



the Preserve. All produce is distributed to the community via 140+ weekly mobile markets, and through donations to 10 emergency food partners. Last year the farm operation donated 13,500+ pounds of fresh produce, almost 15% of the total harvest on the farm. Next year, City Green plans to continue the production of storage crops in an “alley cropping” system, by integrating rows of fruit and nut trees in veggie fields. This agroforestry practice will provide windbreaks for vegetable crops while the tree’s roots will mine nutrients from

deep layers of soil and recycle them to the surface through their leaves, increase water retention and prevent soil erosion, and provide habitat for birds, beneficial insects, and wildlife. 💧



New SADC Valuation Formula

In the first half of 2025, the New Jersey State Agricultural Development Committee (SADC) introduced a new valuation methodology for their highly successful Farmland Preservation program. The new formula allows the SADC to compensate landowners for not only the agricultural value of the land, but the natural resource value as well. This includes factors such as aquifer recharge, water quality protection, proximity to other preserved lands, and the presence of upland forests and wetlands.

This is exceptionally advantageous for farms in the Highlands where most properties contain both high-value agricultural land and important natural resources. By placing restrictions that protect both, a landowner may be able to receive up to 90% of the unrestricted fee value of the property. Preserving agricultural production in the Highlands is a key element of protection of the region.

Agriculture is the second-largest use of land in the Highlands, accounting for approximately 110,000 acres that could otherwise be developed. Farmland preservation is an important component of the overall land preservation strategy in the Highlands, and the new funding methodology makes it an attractive option for Highlands farmers. More information about the new formula is available from the SADC. 💧

Council Member Changes in 2025

The Highlands Act sets specific requirements for Highlands Council membership. The 15 members must include eight elected officials – 5 municipal and 3 county – and seven public members. Among the elected officials, there must be one representative from each of the seven counties in the Highlands region and two from the most populous county, which is Morris.

Since 2012, the Highlands Council has struggled with vacancies and the majority of members serving on expired terms. This ultimately resulted in several public meetings being

cancelled in 2025 due to lack of quorum. By the end of the year, the situation was remedied.

In April 2025, the Highlands Council welcomed Bill Kibler of Califon Borough replacing long-time Council Member Richard Vohden who had been serving as a public member on an expired term for many years. In December, the New Jersey State Senate confirmed four new members of the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council and nominated another three, the latter receiving confirmation in January 2026. This brought the council to full membership for the first time since 2012. 💧

- **Bill Kibler** of Califon Borough fills a public member role on the Highlands Council. Mr. Kibler is the Executive Director of the Great Swamp Watershed Association and brings a wealth of environmental leadership experience to the Council. Prior roles include Director of Policy and Science at the Raritan Headwaters Association and Executive Director of the South Branch Watershed Association.
- **Mary J. Amoroso** of Mahwah is filling the county elected official vacancy on the Highlands Council, left by the passing of Michael Dressler in December. Ms. Amoroso is a Bergen County Commissioner who began her public service career in 2015 when she was elected to the Mahwah Town Council. Her current committee assignments as commissioner include Community Development (Chair), Health Services, Human Services, Organization and Internal Affairs Agenda, Shared Services/Consolidation, and Budget/Finance. Prior to elected office, Amoroso was a journalist holding roles as a reporter and an editor for the *Bergen Record*, and winning a CableAce Award and an Emmy for her talk show on the Comcast Cable network CN8.
- **Joseph Basralian** of Chatham Township is filling a public member vacancy on the Highlands Council. Mr. Basralian currently holds the role of Special Projects Manager at New Jersey Conservation Foundation (NJCF). Prior to his role with NJCF, Mr. Basralian held positions with Farmstead Capital Management, the Nature Conservancy, and the New Jersey Audubon.
- **Tammy Koop** of Belvidere is filling a municipal elected official vacancy on the Highlands Council, becoming the representative for Warren County. As a member of the Belvidere Town Council, Ms. Koop serves as liaison to the Recreation and Education committees. She is also Vice President of the Heritage/Victorian Day Committee.

- **Helen Le Frois** of Newton is filling a municipal elected official role, replacing Michael Francis who had been serving on an expired term for many years. Ms. Le Frois is a three-term elected member of the Newton Town Council, currently serving as Mayor. She has also previously served as a member of the Planning Board, Commissioner and Chair of the Parking Authority, and Chair of the Historic Preservation Advisory Commission. She is also the former Chair of the Sussex County Community College Foundation Board of Trustees. Ms. Le Frois has also served for many years as the Vice President of Development for JBWS.

- **Melonie Marano** of Green Brook is filling a county elected official vacancy on the Highlands Council, becoming the representative for Somerset County. In addition to her role as a County Commissioner in Somerset County, Ms. Marano is also Vice President of Business Development at Universal Vending Management. As County Commissioner she has been liaison to several boards and commissions including Public Works, the Cultural and Heritage Commission, the Open Space Advisory Board, and the Agricultural Development Board. She is a former Committee Member and Mayor of Green Brook Township.

- **Matthew Oswald** of Riverdale is filling a municipal elected official vacancy on the Highlands Council, becoming one of two representatives for Morris County. In addition to his role on the Borough of Riverdale Council, Mr. Oswald is a Union Electrician, Instructor and Vice President of IBEW Local 102. He also serves as liaison to the Sustainable Riverdale Green Team, is a member of the Shade Tree Commission, and Chairperson of the Utilities Committee.

- **Kelley Smith** of Harmony is filling a public member vacancy on the Highlands Council. Ms. Smith is a full-time farmer active in the Warren County agriculture community. With her husband she co-owns J-P Smith Farms, KelRick Farms, and Star D Farm. Ms. Smith also holds several municipal positions in both Harmony Township and Franklin Township, Warren County.



Highlands Council Office, North Road, Chester, NJ

Highlands Council Helps Preserve 35 Acres in Peapack and Gladstone

Over the spring, the Highlands Council worked with New Jersey Conservation Foundation, the State Agricultural Development Committee, and the Somerset County Agricultural Development Board to preserve 35 acres of farmland in Peapack and Gladstone Borough in Somerset County. The Tucker Farm was one of the Borough's highest priority farms for preservation.

Located at the edge of the borough center, Tucker Farm serves a gateway to the rural parts of the municipality. Across the road from the Tucker Farm are two other preserved farms, totaling nearly 100 acres.

The Highlands Council provided \$872,124.60, or roughly 50% of the total cost to secure the agricultural easement used to preserve the property. Highlands Council funding came from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Highlands Conservation Act Grant Program. Another 25% came from Somerset County's Open Space Trust Fund, Peapack and Gladstone's Open Space and Recreation Trust Fund, and a State Agricultural Development Committee Municipal Planning Incentive Grant. Property owners Andrew and Judith Tucker, donated the remaining 25% of the easement value. The preservation project was completed in September. ♦



Highlands Development Credit Bank

2025 ANNUAL REPORT

The Highlands Act charged the Highlands Council with developing a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program as a tool for advancing the regional planning goals of the Act (P.L. 2004, c. 120 C.13:20-13). The Council adopted a TDR Program as part of the RMP and established the Highlands Development Credit Bank (HDC Bank) in 2008. The HDC Bank is supported in its work by Highlands Council staff.

In a TDR program, eligible landowners in Sending Zones may apply for and receive credit allocations reflective of lost development potential. Landowners can then sell the credits to developers who can use them to build in an established Receiving Zone at a density greater than otherwise permitted in the underlying zoning. In the Highlands TDR program, Receiving Zones are voluntary and can be established anywhere in the state. Until voluntary Receiving Zones are established, the HDC Bank is serving as the sole purchaser of these HDCs. Through the end of 2025, the Highlands Council had allocated 4,332.50 Highlands Development Credits (HDCs).

Highlands Development Credit Purchase Program Summary

The HDC Purchase Program is designed to address the landowner equity goals of the Highlands Act and RMP by compensating landowners for lost development potential through TDR transactions in which property owners retain the land but place a deed restriction on their property limiting future development. In the HDC Purchase Program, valuations are based on the development potential of the property prior to the passage of the Highlands Act, along with a comprehensive analysis of the natural resources present on the property. The number of credits is determined and an offer is made using an established per-credit price. This program is administered under the provisions of N.J.A.C. 7:70.

There were no transactions in the HDC Purchase Program in 2025. As of December 31, 2025, the HDC Bank had certified 1,814 credits, permanently protecting more than 2,500 acres. In addition, through the purchase of 1,732 of those credits, the Bank has provided over \$27 million to property owners in the Highlands region. See HDC Registry on the following pages for all HDC recorded easements.

HDC Site Inspections

In 2025, Highlands Council staff visited 35 HDC properties to conduct inspections for compliance with terms of the easements placed on them. All sites were found to be appropriately within the parameters of the easement provisions.

Highlands Development Credit Registry

As of December 31, 2025

Holder/Owner of HDC Credits	Municipality	County	Block(s)	Lot(s)	HDC Easement Recorded	No. of HDCs	Consideration	Acres
HDC Bank	Bethlehem Township	Hunterdon	9	6	7/22/2010	4	\$ 64,000.00	15.45
HDC Bank	Washington Township	Morris	37	4 & 9	8/25/2010	83	\$ 1,328,000.00	93.19
HDC Bank	Mount Olive	Morris	8301	13	4/27/2011	23.25	\$ 372,000.00	2.31
HDC Bank	Oxford	Warren	24	4 & 20	5/3/2011	23	\$ 368,000.00	44.13
HDC Bank	White	Warren	16	45		1	\$ 16,000.00	18.29
HDC Bank	West Milford	Passaic	6902	23	12/13/2011	30.25	\$ 484,000.00	6.95
HDC Bank	Independence	Warren	23	3	12/29/2011	24.75	\$ 396,000.00	41.54
HDC Bank	West Milford	Passaic	8002	4	1/5/2012	122.5	\$ 1,960,000.00	26.23
HDC Bank	Washington Township	Warren	40	33.01	2/24/2012	8	\$ 128,000.00	39.16
HDC Bank	Franklin Township	Warren	15	11.03	2/24/2012	42	\$ 672,000.00	9.69
HDC Bank	Liberty Township	Warren	21.01	20.01	7/9/2012	3	\$ 48,000.00	10.54
HDC Bank	Rockaway Township	Morris	40801	85.01	11/29/2012	27.75	\$ 444,000.00	24.73
HDC Bank	Vernon	Sussex	153	5	3/11/2013	1.75	\$ 28,000.00	17.59
HDC Bank	Washington Township	Warren	40	109	4/16/2013	2	\$ 32,000.00	4.59
HDC Bank	Bethlehem Township	Hunterdon	8	11 & 12.01	5/24/2013	20.5	\$ 328,000.00	75.2
HDC Bank	Ringwood Borough	Passaic	877	16	7/19/2013	26.25	\$ 420,000.00	42.36
HDC Bank	Sparta	Sussex	17001 (formerly 19)	25 (formerly 110)	9/30/2013	63.75	\$ 1,020,000.00	110.69
HDC Bank	White	Warren	16	24, 24.15	9/26/2013	4.5	\$ 72,000.00	14.5
HDC Bank	Sparta	Sussex	35002 (formerly 6.25)	10, 11 (formerly 70.01, 70.02)	12/19/2014	7	\$ 112,000.00	6
HDC Bank	Union Township	Hunterdon	15	1	1/15/2015	1.75	\$ 28,000.00	26.27
HDC Bank	Union Township	Hunterdon	15	1	1/15/2015	1.75	\$ 28,000.00	-
HDC Bank	Union Township	Hunterdon	15	1	1/15/2015	1.75	\$ 28,000.00	-
HDC Bank	Union Township	Hunterdon	25	21	8/12/2016	11	\$ 176,000.00	43.21
HDC Bank	Clinton Township	Hunterdon	68	6	11/1/2016	86.25	\$ 1,380,000.00	9.9
HDC Bank	Oxford Township	Warren	2	12	8/1/2017	12	\$ 192,000.00	20.55
HDC Bank	Oxford Township	Warren	2	14	8/1/2017	20.5	\$ 328,000.00	34.52
HDC Bank	Oxford Township	Warren	2	18.03	8/1/2017	23.75	\$ 380,000.00	48.89
HDC Bank	Washington Township	Warren	4	4	8/1/2017	1.75	\$ 28,000.00	13.83
HDC Bank	Washington Township	Morris	20	52	8/1/2017	3.5	\$ 56,000.00	10.89
HDC Bank	Vernon	Sussex	611 (formerly 240)	3 (formerly 4)	8/8/2017	24.75	\$ 396,000.00	118.4
HDC Bank	Jefferson	Morris	387	8	8/31/2017	5.75	\$ 92,000.00	10.27
HDC Bank	Mount Olive	Morris	5300	16	10/17/2017	29.75	\$ 476,000.00	10.46
HDC Bank	West Milford	Passaic	11106	13, 17	11/20/2017	2.5	\$ 40,000.00	1.35
HDC Bank	Ringwood Borough	Passaic	508	2	12/21/2017	88.75	\$ 1,420,000.00	38.37
HDC Bank	Ringwood Borough	Passaic	508	2.29	12/21/2017	74	\$ 1,184,000.00	19.36
HDC Bank	Rockaway Township	Morris	40701; 40703	21; 8, 9	11/21/2017	5.5	\$ 88,000.00	18.1
HDC Bank	White	Warren	68	59	11/29/2017	8	\$ 128,000.00	19.34
HDC Bank	Jefferson	Morris	555	4	12/26/2017	147.75	\$ 2,364,000.00	162.79

Highlands Development Credit Registry

As of December 31, 2025



Holder/Owner of HDC Credits	Municipality	County	Block(s)	Lot(s)	HDC Easement Recorded	No. of HDCs	Consideration	Acres
HDC Bank	Sparta	Sussex	34004 (formerly 4)	6 (formerly 45.01)	12/21/2017	18.75	\$ 300,000.00	16.84
HDC Bank	Hopatcong	Sussex	40005	18	12/8/2017	5.5	\$ 88,000.00	27.4
HDC Bank	Bethlehem Township	Hunterdon	33	12	1/16/2018	18	\$ 288,000.00	51.59
HDC Bank	West Milford	Passaic	6803	4	2/16/2018	30.25	\$ 484,000.00	16.11
HDC Bank	Harmony Township	Warren	24	10.07	2/26/2018	2.25	\$ 36,000.00	1.79
HDC Bank	White	Warren	13	21	3/19/2018	14	\$ 224,000.00	30.74
HDC Bank	Bethlehem Township	Hunterdon	18	2	5/15/2018	20	\$ 320,000.00	2.23
HDC Bank	Lebanon Township	Hunterdon	37	25	6/15/2018	4	\$ 64,000.00	29.65
HDC Bank	Roxbury Township	Morris	9203	1	6/29/2018	42.25	\$ 676,000.00	10.26
HDC Bank	Liberty Township	Warren	10	4	7/13/2018	51.75	\$ 828,000.00	90.9
HDC Bank	Liberty Township	Warren	11	43	7/13/2018	1.5	\$ 24,000.00	4.7
HDC Bank	Liberty Township	Warren	11	44	7/13/2018	4.25	\$ 68,000.00	7.14
HDC Bank	Lebanon Township	Hunterdon	65	2	7/2/2018	2.25	\$ 36,000.00	6.33
HDC Bank	Bedminster Township	Somerset	2	8.02	8/10/2018	18.25	\$ 292,000.00	39.46
HDC Bank	Harmony Township	Warren	24	10.06	8/20/2018	2.25	\$ 36,000.00	2.31
Contact HDC Bank	Lopatcong Township	Warren	90	13, 16.01	8/20/2018	26.25	*	60.35
HDC Bank	Harmony Township	Warren	24	10.05	9/18/2018	2.25	\$ 36,000.00	2.47
HDC Bank	West Milford	Passaic	13301	12	9/28/2018	7.25	\$ 116,000.00	11.54
HDC Bank	Bloomington	Passaic	3005	5	9/28/2018	10	\$ 160,000.00	24.87
HDC Bank	Alexandria	Hunterdon	4	12	1/8/2019	49.25	\$ 788,000.00	92.9
HDC Bank	Lebanon Township	Hunterdon	56	13.02	4/29/2019	16.75	\$ 268,000.00	72.19
HDC Bank	Lebanon Township	Hunterdon	56	10	5/28/2019	31.50	\$ 504,000.00	112.84
HDC Bank	Pohatcong Township	Warren	110; 117	9; 13	6/10/2019	6.75	\$ 108,000.00	53.14
HDC Bank	Tewksbury	Hunterdon	15	23	7/15/2019	44.25	\$ 708,000.00	46.69
HDC Bank	Tewksbury	Hunterdon	14	9.02	9/12/2019	44.25	\$ 708,000.00	45.94
HDC Bank	Tewksbury	Hunterdon	16	13	10/16/2019	24.50	\$ 392,000.00	11.52
HDC Bank	Tewksbury	Hunterdon	19	13.07	10/16/2019	23.00	\$ 368,000.00	42.55
HDC Bank	Tewksbury	Hunterdon	13	8, 10	11/20/2019	44.25	\$ 708,000.00	70.05
HDC Bank	Mount Olive	Morris	5300	38	11/20/2019	25.75	\$ 412,000.00	53.14
Contact HDC Bank	Tewksbury	Hunterdon	15	8.02	12/5/2019	26.25	*	16.65
HDC Bank	Independence	Warren	1	67	1/17/2020	30.25	\$ 484,000.00	26.76
HDC Bank	Mansfield	Warren	1001.01	20, 21, 22	1/24/2020	35.75	\$ 572,000.00	109
HDC Bank	Mount Olive	Morris	800	15	5/27/2020	31.75	\$ 508,000.00	88.16
HDC Bank	Mount Olive	Morris	800	16	5/27/2020	4.00	\$ 64,000.00	15.29
Contact HDC Bank	White Township	Warren	14	17	6/30/2020	25.75	*	62.00
						1,814	\$ 27,772,000	2,565.14

* Property owners in the HDC Purchase Program may choose to record a deed of easement (DOE) on their property, while retaining ownership of the HDCs. In these cases, the HDC Bank has not purchased the credits. The property owner may choose to sell the credits any time in the future, but the property and the resources contained within it remain permanently protected through the DOE.

A Tale of Two Watersheds

After marking the 20th Anniversary of the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act in 2024, the Highlands Council continued reflecting upon its implementation in 2025. Building upon an analysis that first began in 2023 with the Council’s review of forestry best practices across the country, an instructive model for watershed protection emerged just a few miles away.

The New Jersey Highlands region and the New York City Catskill watershed lands are roughly analogous. While similar in size, population served, amount of water supplied daily, and the resources present that contribute to protection of water quality and quantity, there is a stark difference in how the two water supply areas have been protected. The table below was first developed and presented in October 2025 to provide a high-level overview of this comparison. 💧

	 New Jersey Highlands Region	 NYC Catskill/Delaware Watershed
Area	1,340 sq. mi.	1,972 sq. mi.
Communities	88 Municipalities Parts of 7 Counties	42 Municipalities Parts of 5 Counties
In-Region Population	850,000	62,000
Water Exported	840 million gallons/day	1.1 billion gallons/day
Residents Served	6 million 70% of NJ residents >200 Municipalities 15 of State’s 21 Counties 8 out of 10 residents living in Overburdened Communities	9 million 8 million in NYC 1 million in Ulster, Orange, Putnam & Westchester Counties 90% of NYC Water Supply
Agricultural Land	110,000 acres in agriculture	135,000 acres in agriculture
Forested Land	54% Forested (725 sq. mi.)	75% Forested (1,500 sq. mi.)
Annual Investment	\$5.5 million annually since 2011 Operating: \$3 million Municipal Grants: \$2.5 million	\$108 million annually since 1997 <i>2025 commitment of additional \$228 million over next five years.*</i>

Figures are approximate. Source for all except: “Review of the New York City Watershed Protection Program,” National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2020. *Source: “NYC DEP Commits \$228 Million to Help Protect Forests Near the Watershed, Support Area Farms and Agriculture Through Local Partnership,” NYCDEP Press Release, January 2025.*



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State of New Jersey

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