

# Highlands Council Update

November 2025

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Ramapo Lake, Ramapo Mountain State Forest, Oakland Borough, Bergen County

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# Highlands Council Monthly Report

*Summary of Activities* | November 1-30, 2025

## From the Executive Director

**Judge Michael Dressler.** We need to begin this month with the sad news of the passing of long-time Highlands Council member Mike Dressler. Anyone who had the good fortune of knowing Mike understood that he was a person of great dignity and integrity. His life was defined by his dedication to public service and giving back to the community. We were very lucky here at the Highlands that he decided to give 14 years of his time, insights, and intelligence to our work. Considering that the Council has been around for 21 years, his tenure impacted 2/3 of that time.

If you didn't know the Judge personally, you may not have been aware that he was confined to a wheelchair as the result of a spinal cord injury he suffered while still in high school. Rather than let his injury dictate his life going forward, he instead graduated from college and law school and embarked on a career in public life that began with his election to office in his hometown of Cresskill when he was only 22 years old. His participation in local government continued as he went on to become the mayor of Cresskill and eventually the Bergen County Surrogate. His law practice included serving as counsel to the Bergen County Board of Freeholders (now Commissioners) and the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority. It was a great day for the Highlands Council in 2011 when he was nominated and appointed to be the Bergen County representative where he helped guide the Council for the past decade and a half.

Despite his physical limitations, Mike very rarely missed either a public Highlands Council meeting or the meetings of one of the many Council committees he either participated on or chaired. Anyone who has been following our efforts lately knows how important that participation was in allowing the Council to go forward with its important work. He took the mission of the Council and its staff and his role as a Council member very seriously and his advice and input were always valuable. It is difficult for us at the Highlands Council to adequately express our appreciation for his work or how much we are going to miss him. Our condolences go out to his family and loved ones.

**Back to Drought Conditions.** We have been discussing for the past several months that the entire Highlands Region has been categorized in either a "Moderate" or "Severe" drought. That designation has spread to other parts of the state with the Governor finally declaring a Drought Warning just this week. The lack of adequate rainfall is particularly concerning in the Highlands as the region is the source of some or all of the drinking water for 70% of the state's population. Looking back, 20 of the past 24 months have had below normal rainfall. This extended period of below normal precipitation combined with well above normal temperatures has placed a strain on both drinking water supplies in the Highlands and the region's important environmental resources.

Groundwater levels are down, stream flows are well below normal, and reservoir levels across the Highlands are at an alarmingly low point at a time when water levels should be on the increase. It will take an extended period of normal or above normal rainfall to remedy these impacts. While a great deal of attention is directed towards reducing consumption whenever there is a drought warning issued, the real

focus should be on protection of supply. This is the mission of the Highlands Council. We can expect increased periods of drought interspersed with extreme precipitation events going forward as the effects of Climate Change are felt. Every day, regardless of whether we are experiencing drought or plentiful rainfall, 840 million gallons of water are exported from the Highlands. The resources of the region, particularly its forests and wetlands, need to be adequately protected to ensure that the Highlands is resilient enough to continue to provide sufficient water to meet the state's needs. This is precisely why the lack of proper funding for land preservation, land stewardship, and ecological restoration in the Highlands is problematic. Failure to support these efforts is tantamount to playing Russian Roulette with the future of the state. The issuance of a drought warning for the second time in two years should be a wake-up call that the time to properly fund the Highlands Council's work is well past and is a matter of vital statewide importance.

**Reflections on 2025.** While we have spent the past several issues of this report looking forward to a new Administration and the steps that are needed to support the work of the Highlands Council, the end of the year is a time to take stock of the Council's accomplishments during 2025. It has been both a busy and successful year at 100 North Road. Our day-to-day tasks are significant, but we were also able to make progress on several important initiatives. One of the highlights was the completion of the (now award-winning) Branding & Marketing Plan for the region. Intended to support economic sustainability in the Highlands and to elevate awareness of the region and its importance to the entire state, this project will provide dividends for many years into the future. While we love being able to provide the towns, counties, and businesses of the Highlands with the ability to tout that "You Never Knew Jersey" until you've come to the Highlands, it is just as significant to raise awareness about a place where 7 million people get their drinking water and another 18 million visit each year for entertainment, recreation, and enjoyment.

One of the things we are particularly proud of was our ability to assist our municipalities with navigating the difficult challenges that came from having to balance meeting both their Affordable Housing obligations and their obligation to adequately protect the region's resources. It was one of the ways we were able to demonstrate the Council's value as an important partner for our towns and as an essential part of a sustainable future for the state. This was accompanied by nearly a dozen towns seeking to be fully conforming Highlands municipalities, including communities that were entirely within the Planning Area of the region. The Planning Area of the Highlands contains a wealth of important resources, just like the Preservation Area. Adequately protecting the region depends upon being able to protect the environmental systems across the entirety of the Highlands and welcoming these communities into this effort will play an important part in the success of that endeavor.

Additionally, we continued to work with our municipalities on compliance with new stormwater regulations, continued to support sustainable agricultural initiatives in the region, completed and rolled out a significant upgrade to our website and interactive map, worked with the City of Newark on managing its 35,000 watershed holdings, and moved forward with a regional open space and recreation plan. Council staff also began field work on monitoring stream conditions in the region and began an ambitious climate monitoring project that will eventually result in an update to the Regional Master Plan to address the implications of Climate Change for the region's resources. While this was taking place, Council staff continued to conduct the required periodic review of the impact of the Highlands Act and the RMP known as the MPRR.

I want to conclude by thanking the Highlands staff and the Highlands Council members for their hard work and contributions to these efforts. I also want to thank our agency partners across state government for their support and coordination with our mission. As productive as this past year has been, we are anxiously looking forward to 2026. We have an ambitious agenda for the coming year as we endeavor to do the best job we can for the people of the Highlands region and the entire state of New Jersey. It is not an overstatement to say that the success of our work is of utmost importance to the future of the state and we take that responsibility seriously.



Ben Spinelli  
Executive Director

## Municipal and County Regional Master Plan (RMP) Implementation

Updates related to Highlands Council-funded projects that help implement the RMP.

### Completed Projects

The following municipalities/counties have submitted project deliverables that were reviewed by Highlands Council staff and found to be consistent with the RMP and eligible for reimbursement.

- **Bernardsville Borough, Somerset County.** Highlands Center Feasibility Study
- **Mahwah Township, Bergen County.** Master Plan Reexamination Report and Master Plan Element, Conformance Ordinance
- **Montville Township, Morris County.** Floodplain Reconnection and Groundwater Recharge Demonstration Project (partial completion)
- **Morris County Park Commission, Morris County.** Floristic Inventory and Assessment of Mount Hope Historical County Park

### Deliverables Received

The following municipalities have submitted project deliverables that are currently being reviewed by Highlands Council staff for consistency with the RMP.

- **Lebanon Township, Hunterdon County.** Municipal Forest Stewardship Plan
- **Hunterdon County.** Watershed Management Plan (partial completion)

### Approved Scopes

Highlands Council staff have approved scopes of work for the following projects in the specified municipalities/counties. With approved scopes, project work may begin.

- **High Bridge Borough, Hunterdon County.** Stormwater Management Planning/MS4 Watershed Improvement Plan
- **Mount Olive Township, Morris County.** Baseline Characterization of Water Quality and Aquatic Habitat in the Budd Lake Watershed, Phase II
- **West Milford Township, Passaic County.** Zoning Ordinance Changes

## Tourism Expansion Grants

- **Holland Township, Hunterdon County.** In November, Holland Township in Hunterdon County was awarded a Highlands Tourism Expansion Grant award to support the Township's annual Community Day, which in 2026 will be focused on the nation's semiquincentennial. Specifically, Highlands Council funding will be matched with municipal dollars to fund a "USA 250th Anniversary" fireworks display. The fireworks display will serve as the grand finale of the day's festivities and 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.

## Sustainable Agriculture Grants

- **Local Grains Project, Foodshed Alliance.** The Foodshed Alliance provided the Highlands Council with a report summarizing activities since March 2025. Highlights included:
  - Released "[Growing Small Grains in the New Jersey Highlands: A Manual for Farmers.](#)"
  - Established a nearly 2-acre demonstration plot to showcase how small grains and specialty crops can: increase the diversity of available food in local communities; improve soil quality on land that was once receiving chemical inputs; and provide local farmers with access to previously untapped markets. The demonstration plot is a collaborative effort between local farmers, grain experts, and agronomists.
  - Held workshops and demonstrations for farmers interested in maximizing the benefits of growing and processing local grains.
  - Recruited more than 10 farmers into the program.

## Project Reviews

The Highlands Council does not issue permits but is statutorily required to review certain proposed projects in the region for consistency with the Highlands RMP. In some cases, the Highlands Council shares jurisdiction with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP).

- **Planning Area Consistency Review. Advanced Cardiology, LLC**

*Hackettstown, Warren County*

Applicant proposes to expand an existing parking area into undeveloped portions of the property. The proposed project is located in a designated Highlands Center within the town.

*Highlands Council staff finding: Deferred to municipality with consistency conditions noted.*

- **Planning Area Consistency Review. Proposed Warehouse - Crossroads Mahwah**

*Mahwah Township, Bergen County*

Applicant is proposing a 1.2-million square-foot warehouse building with associated office and parking space. All improvements are proposed within the previously developed portion of the property, outside of the 50' freshwater wetlands transition line as verified by NJDEP.

*Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent subject to specified conditions.*

- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment. Oxbow Farm Club**

*Bedminster Township, Somerset County*

A site-specific amendment to the Upper Raritan WQMP is required to accommodate the construction of a 17-bedroom addition to an existing 9-bedroom facility and a separate event space/venue.

*Highlands Council Staff review is in progress.*



- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment. 56 Kitchell Road**

*Harding Township, Morris County*

A site-specific amendment to the Northeast WQMP is required to accommodate a proposed 100% affordable housing development that will result in an additional 5.13 acres added to the WQMP area. The development will consist of approximately 54 dwelling units.

*Highlands Council Staff review is in progress.*

- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment. 1105 Mt. Kemble Ave. (modification)**

*Harding Township, Morris County*

A proposed redevelopment of property to multi-family residential use requires an amendment to the Northeast WQMP area. This is a modification to an earlier application. The project site now consists of two lots, and the applicant is proposing an additional 6.57 acres of Sewer Service Area. Water supply will be provided by New Jersey American Water.

*Highlands Council Staff review is in progress.*

## Science Initiatives

- **Climate Change Technical Report for the Highlands Region.** Following approval of a contract with [environmental science, engineering, and consulting firm Verdantas](#) in October, a contract has been signed, and a kick-off meeting is scheduled for mid-December. This report will provide the scientific foundation for future RMP updates, programs, and policies, and is expected to be completed before the end of 2026.

## Land Preservation Program Updates

- **Annual Highlands Development Credit (HDC) Easement Inspections.** Highlands Council staff members are in the process of annual site inspections to review HDC properties for compliance with easement terms. In November, Highlands Council staff visited 12 properties. All were found to be in compliance.

## Outreach & Education

- **New Jersey League of Municipalities Conference, November 18-20.** Highlands Council staff members had the pleasure of meeting and speaking with several representatives from our constituent municipalities at the annual League of Municipalities Conference in Atlantic City. In addition, staff members were able to attend informative educational sessions.



- In November, Highlands Council staff attended the **NJ Community Water Monitoring Summit** and the **Warren County Economic Development Committee Small Business Appreciation** event.

- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 18 inquiries from constituents in November.

## Municipal & County Coordination

Highlands Council staff frequently meet with our constituent municipalities and counties to discuss their priorities and how they intersect with implementation of the Highlands RMP.

- In November, the Highlands Council met with Harding Township, Morris County (affordable housing); Hunterdon County (Parcel Update Pilot Project); Roxbury Township, Morris County (property-specific); and Mahwah Township, Bergen County (project-specific).

## Legislative Update

Following is a summary of legislative updates from the month of November.

### Highlands-related legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsors	Bill Summary	Bill Status
<a href="#">S4827</a>	Ruiz, M. Teresa	Requires data center owners and operators to submit semi-annual water and energy usage reports to BPU.	11/6/2025 - Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee
<a href="#">S4736</a>	Singleton, Troy Wimberly, Benjie E.	Enhances ability of religious and nonprofit organizations to convert certain property to inclusionary developments with affordable housing.	10/27/2025 - Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Community and Urban Affairs Committee

## Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The December Highlands Council public meeting originally scheduled for Thursday, December 11, was cancelled due to lack of quorum. The first public meeting of 2026 is scheduled for Thursday, January 15, 2026. All meetings are held at 4:00 p.m. at the Highlands Council office in Chester, NJ. Complete details are available on the [Public Meetings page](#) of the Highlands Council website.



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