

# Highlands Council Update

October 2025

Released November 10, 2025



Pumpkin patch in Allamuchy Township, Warren County

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# Highlands Council Monthly Report

*Summary of Activities* | October 1 - 31, 2025

## From the Executive Director

**Congratulations to Governor-Elect Sherrill.** As the transition process unfolds over the next several weeks, we look forward to learning more about the Governor-Elect's vision for New Jersey and her plans for the continued success of our great garden state. Along with all other Authorities reporting directly to the Office of the Governor, the Highlands Council provided a written briefing in October to support the transition. Many of the items highlighted in that memo have been addressed in this monthly update before ... in some cases multiple times. Following are the key points from that memo.

- **Protecting the Highlands is a matter of statewide importance.** For regular readers this may be a tired point, but it bears repeating: While representing only about 15% of the state's total land mass, the Highlands region provides all or a portion of the drinking water for 70% of New Jersey's residents. This includes over 80% of the state's population living in designated overburdened communities. The Highlands **exports** approximately 840 million gallons of clean drinking water DAILY to the rest of the state. Nearly all of the state's major population centers are drinking Highlands water, and many businesses in the state rely on the Highlands for plentiful clean water. In addition, as detailed below, the Highlands region is critical to New Jersey's climate resilience, not only because of its importance as a primary source of drinking water, but also because of its forests and agricultural lands.
- **Funding is insufficient.** The Highlands Council's operating budget and grant budget were cut in half in 2011 and have remained at these levels since. These cuts have hampered the operations of the Council and have the potential to severely limit the effectiveness of the Highlands Act and the Council's ability to implement the intent of the Act. In addition, the Highlands Council operates without a reliable and repeating source of funding for land preservation, no funds for land management, stewardship or restoration. The challenging tasks of managing the region have been accomplished with a bare minimum investment in the work of the Council.
- **Protecting the drinking water supply of the citizens it serves is a fundamental responsibility of good government.** This is a non-partisan, non-political matter.

Despite many struggles over its 21-year history, the Highlands Council has been successful in carrying out its mission. However, we face daunting challenges. Increased demand for Highlands water, continuing development pressure, and the uncertainties created by climate change all threaten the region.

We are excited to work with Governor-Elect Sherrill and her administration on restoring the Highlands Council to the entity envisioned in the Highlands Act, capable of fully implementing the strong protections it prescribes. A thriving New Jersey Highlands helps ensure a healthy and prosperous future for New Jersey.

**Climate Assessment.** The Highlands Council took action at its October meeting to award a contract for the collection and analysis of data related to the impacts of climate change on the resources of the

Highlands. This work is intended to provide the foundation for a subsequent amendment to the Highlands RMP and inform the work of the Highlands Council going forward. Climate impacts on the 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 alter the composition of Highlands forests, which play the leading role in protection of the region's water quality and quantity. There will be impacts to the region's agricultural industry that will require an evolution in practices. All the while, the region will still be called upon to export 840 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.

These uncertainties should be alarming to anyone concerned about the future of our great state. While the Highlands Act was not passed in 2004 as climate legislation, over time it has become apparent that it is. The purpose of the Act, and the mission of the Highlands Council, is to ensure that New Jersey will always be a sustainable place to live. Managing 17% of the state's land mass for the benefits it provides to the remaining 83% is no easy task but one that must be successful. Climate change is making this all the more difficult. The Highlands Council is committed to this responsibility, and we will meet this challenge. The Climate Change Technical Report will provide a sound foundation for formulating the actions that we know we will need to take.

**Impact of Highlands Grants.** With a limited grant budget, it is essential that the Highlands Council and its partners make every dollar count. The Highlands Protection Fund, an allocation from the Realty Transfer Fee, provides about \$2.1 million each year that the Council can then pass on to Highlands counties and municipalities for use in planning, engineering and other essential tasks associated with activities that help implement the Highlands RMP. In addition to funding this basic work of municipal and county RMP Conformance, our grants have been used to identify and plan projects that protect and enhance the entire region's forests, lakes and waterways. With an exceptionally small staff, much of the important work of protecting the region's resources must be accomplished through cooperative actions taken with Highlands counties and municipalities.

Because our grants have a statutorily limited scope of use, it's critically important to maximize their impact. For example, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) recently announced a round of Water Quality Restoration grants that included over \$1.3 million that will benefit Highlands municipalities including Rockaway Township, Liberty Township, Jefferson Township and other Lake Hopatcong municipalities. These awards will fund projects made possible by prior work on lake management and watershed improvement plans funded by the Highlands Council. This is precisely how our grants were intended to be used – as the foundation for additional funding that will improve water quality and resource restoration throughout the region. We are grateful for the work done by our municipal partners and for the additional funding directed to the region by the NJDEP to help carry out the important mission of the Highlands Council.

**League of Municipalities.** The Highlands Council will have staff at the upcoming League of Municipalities Conference in Atlantic City. The Convention will take place November 18-20 this year. For municipal officials in the region and anyone interested in our work, please stop by and see us at booth 122. It's a great opportunity to spend a few minutes face-to-face with our staff to discuss the benefits of



working with the Council or to ask any questions you might have about how we can work together to move our important mission forward. The past year has been extremely busy, and a lot of great things have been accomplished in that time. We look forward to this chance to discuss all things Highlands with you.



Ben Spinelli  
Executive Director

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

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

### Deliverables Received

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

- **Morris County Park Commission.** Mount Hope Historical County Park Floristic Study and Assessment

### 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.

- **Harding Township, Morris County.** Stormwater Management Plan

### Tourism Expansion Grants

- **Hackettstown BID Partnership.** A grant report from the BID received in October shared information about the success of its annual Oktoberfest event held the weekend of September 27. Highlands Council funding enabled an enhanced 'Kids Zone' and entertainment at the event. The BID reported that more than 18,000 visitors attended the event and the Highlands region tourism brand was featured prominently, on two double-sided lawn signs entering from either side of the Kids Zone. The Highlands region logo also appeared on social media posts, flyers, email blasts, and the event website leading up to the event as well as on four large "thanks to our sponsors" sandwich boards placed throughout the festival area. The BID intends to continue incorporating the Highlands region brand into upcoming events including the "Hometown Holiday" commencing soon.
- **Hopatcong Borough Partnership.** The Highlands region tourism brand was featured on the website and on signage at the Lake Hopatcong Foundation [Lake Loop Bike/Hike/Paddle Challenge](#) on October 5 at Hopatcong State Park.



## Municipal requests to align with the RMP

- **Allamuchy Township, Warren County – Planning Area Petition Approved.** Allamuchy Township has been working toward municipal alignment with the Highlands RMP for the portion of the municipality in the Highlands Preservation Area since 2011. Earlier this year, the Township completed an Assessment Report and passed a resolution formally petitioning the Highlands Council for conformance in the Planning Area. Following [a staff review of the Township’s petition materials](#), the Highlands Council voted to approve the request at the Council’s October public meeting.
- **Mendham Township, Morris County – Conformance Petition Approved.** Mendham Township is located entirely in the Planning Area of the Highlands region, where alignment with the Highlands RMP is voluntary. In 2024, the township completed an Assessment Report and passed a resolution formally petitioning the Highlands Council for conformance. Following [a staff review of the Township’s petition materials](#), the Highlands Council voted to approve the request at the Council’s October public meeting.
- **Mount Arlington Borough, Morris County – Planning Area Petition Approved.** Mount Arlington Borough has been working toward municipal alignment with the Highlands RMP in its Highlands Preservation Area lands since 2011. In 2024, the Borough completed an Assessment Report covering its planning area lands, which make up the majority of the municipality. Earlier this year, Mt. Arlington passed a resolution formally petitioning the Highlands Council for conformance in the Planning Area. Following [a staff review of the Borough’s petition materials](#), the Highlands Council voted to approve the request at the Council’s October public meeting.

## 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 review is pending.*

## GIS Updates

- Highlands Council GIS Manager Jocelyn van den Akker has been elected to the Executive Committee of the [New Jersey Geospatial Forum](#).
- The Highlands Resource Explorer (REX) was recently updated with additional data and features including the ability to produce reports for multi-parcel selections; the inclusion of impervious surface values on all reports; and functionality enhancements to improve the user experience.

## Science Initiatives

- **Climate Change Technical Report for the Highlands Region.** At its October public meeting, the Highlands Council approved a contract with [environmental science, engineering, and](#)

consulting firm [Verdantas](#) to develop a Climate Change Technical Report for the Highlands Region. The report will provide the scientific foundation for future RMP updates, programs, and policies. The Council approved an award not to exceed \$110,000 and the report is expected to be completed in 6 to 9 months.

## Land Preservation Program Updates

- **Annual Highlands Development Credit (HDC) Easement Inspections.** Notifications were sent in October to 19 property owners advising them of upcoming inspections. Highlands Council staff members will be visiting properties to review and document conditions for compliance with easement terms in November and December.

## Outreach & Education

- **UPCOMING: New Jersey League of Municipalities Conference, November 18-20.** Visit Highlands Council staff members at **booth 122** in the Exhibit Hall during the annual [League Conference in Atlantic City](#).
- **North Jersey Rivers Conference.** The Highlands Council had an information table at the 2025 North Jersey Rivers Conference held on Friday, October 17 at Centenary University in Hackettstown. The conference attracts government officials, representatives of nonprofit organizations and private citizens interested in learning more about northern New Jersey watersheds and how to protect them.
- **Sussex County Harvest, Honey & Garlic Festival.** The Highlands Council was once again invited by Sussex County to have an informational table at this annual event held at the County Fairgrounds in Augusta, NJ. Held this year on Saturday, October 18, the free festival attracts thousands of visitors and features local farm products, craft vendors and artists, live music, and activities for children. Highlands Council staff had the opportunity to meet and talk with many constituents interested in the work of the Council.
- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 19 inquiries from constituents in October.



Highlands Council staff engaging with members of the public at recent events.

## 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 October, the Highlands Council met with **Warren County** (Tourism); **Peapack & Gladstone** (RMP Implementation); **Hunterdon County** (Planning priorities).

- The Highlands Council provided a letter of support for the *Connect Warren County Complete Streets Policy and Implementation Plan* to be recognized by the New Jersey Chapter of the American Planning Association and receive the Outstanding Plan Award.

## Agency & Organization Collaboration

Highlands Council staff often meet with sister state agencies to ensure effective coordination; professional and non-governmental organizations to learn and collaborate; and other entities that have a stake in protecting the New Jersey Highlands.

- At the request of the **Governor's Authorities Unit**, the Highlands Council provided a **Transition Report Memo** outlining the Highlands Council's mission, priorities, challenges, and recommended actions for the next administration.
- The Highlands Council provided the **NJ Office of Planning Advocacy** (OPA) with comments on the Final Draft New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan (State Plan) and met with representatives from the agency.
- In October, Highlands Council staff also met with the **City of Newark** (Newark Watershed/Resilient NJ: Regional Assistance Program), the **NJ Department of Agriculture** (Northwest New Jersey processing and Innovation Center), and **New Jersey Conservation Foundation** (Land Preservation project).
- In October, Highlands Council attended the New Jersey Highlands Coalition Annual Meeting, the GoHunterdon Annual Meeting; and the Downtown New Jersey Conference.

## Council Committee Meetings

- The Budget and Finance Committee and the Plan Conformance Committee met in October.

## Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The next Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled Thursday December 11, 2025. 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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