

Highlands Council Update

September 2025

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | September 1-30, 2025

From the Executive Director

Drought. Again. Following a brief respite, thanks to a rainy May and June this past Spring, New Jersey finds itself back in a drought watch. The entire Highlands region is categorized as either moderately or severely dry. This is particularly concerning as the Highlands provides drinking water to approximately 70% of the state's population. In addition to the impacts on drinking water supplies (Spruce Run Reservoir is currently 17 feet below full pool level and Wanaque Reservoir is at 50% capacity), there are ecological and agricultural impacts. Stream flows in the region are all well-below normal for even this typically drier part of the year and groundwater levels are also well-below normal. This has the potential to negatively affect fish and wildlife that rely on the Highlands' waterways, and the situation is compounded by the fact that we are now well into our second year of below normal rainfall. Higher than normal water temperatures and lower than normal water levels over an extended period will have severe environmental impacts. In addition, it is likely that wildfire risk will dramatically rise over the next few weeks and months. Long-range forecasts call for above-normal temperatures and below-normal precipitation for the next three months. Future variability in precipitation patterns from historic norms will likely become common with swings between intense rainfall events and extended periods of drought. The Highlands will be called upon to deliver an adequate, reliable supply of clean drinking water regardless of where we find ourselves in the rainfall cycle. Coming up with a long-term management strategy for the Highlands region that accounts for the impacts of Climate Change is essential for our state's future. A Climate Change Technical Report for the Highlands Region is being developed that will provide a solid scientific foundation for developing a climate action plan for the region.

Enjoy the New Jersey Highlands - Fall marks the height of the agritourism season in the Highlands. Apple picking, pumpkin picking, hayrides, navigating a corn maze, shopping the region's great small town main streets, checking out the beautiful fall colors-these are all great reasons to come to the Highlands in the Fall. When you visit, keep an eye out for the New Jersey Highlands branding with the tag line, "you never knew Jersey." Our tourism grant partners have been helping us introduce this new brand, which was created to increase economic sustainability in the region, by highlighting all of the great things the region has to offer. Pull on your favorite sweater and grab an apple cider donut. Clear blue skies, golden sunshine, and crisp autumn weather all beckon you to spend some time enjoying the Highlands. In fact, that's the address for the new brand website still in development, enjoynjhighlands.com. The Highlands is more than just the place where your drinking water comes from (as if that's not enough of a reason to love the region), it's home to so much of what makes New Jersey a great place to live, work and play.



Our Municipal Partners - The structure of the Highlands Act places a great deal of responsibility for implementation on the 88 municipalities of the region. Manifesting the protections required by the act

largely revolves around local land use ordinances and other initiatives taken at the municipal level. These implementation measures are spelled out in the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP), and so the main mechanism for achieving the goals of the Highlands Act is conformance with the RMP.

While Plan Conformance is only mandatory in the Preservation Area portion of the region, a great deal of important Highlands resources at risk of being lost to inappropriate development are found in the Planning Area. That makes the voluntary participation of towns with Planning Area lands a vital component for adequately protecting the Highlands. The past year has seen an uptick in voluntary Planning Area conformance activity. From small towns located entirely in the Planning Area like Netcong and Belvidere, to Roxbury and Allamuchy Townships that recently decided to add their Planning Area lands to their existing conformance work in the Preservation Area, we couldn't be more pleased to welcome these towns as partners in the hard work of protecting resources that are so vital to the state's well-being. Jefferson, Union Township, Mount Arlington, Mendham Township, and Washington Township (Warren County) are all also among the municipalities that have recently initiated or completed work to bring Planning Area lands into conformance with the Highlands RMP. The Highlands Council is here to be an asset for the region's municipalities and brings a host of benefits to help our towns deal with the issues that challenge them. From stormwater management to affordable housing compliance and land preservation planning along with many other pressing needs that communities across the state are facing, the Highlands Council brings resources to assist our communities that are not available to towns outside of the region. Whether you are a community official or a resident of a non-conforming Highlands municipality, you need to ask yourself why your town is not working with the Council-particularly in these challenging times for local government. The Council and its staff are ready to work with you. Your town, the region, and the entire state will all benefit from making the commitment to protecting the region we love and call home.

Looking Forward - By the time this report is issued in November, we will likely know who the next governor of New Jersey will be. Regardless of who the successful candidate is, the next governor and new administration will need to take measures to ensure that the Highlands Council has the capacity necessary to realize its important mission. The passage of the Highlands Act in 2004 was a tremendous step in protecting the resources of the region and safeguarding the future of New Jersey. However, the Act and its measures were just the first step in the long-term defense of the Highlands and the conservation of the assets that will guarantee that the state will always have a clean, reliable, and adequate supply of drinking water. This, along with protection of all the other important features of the Highlands, from unspoiled forests to some of the nation's best farmland, is at the core of the Highlands Act and is the basis for the sometimes difficult, but always important, work of the Highlands Council. Over the past two decades, the state has failed to make the necessary investments in that mission.

Currently the Council operates with only 10 of its statutorily mandated 15 members. Somerset County and Warren County are both without representation, and Morris County has only one of its required two members on the Council. The lack of Council members has led to the cancellation of several meetings over the past year due to the lack of a quorum. Eight members need to be present to hold a meeting and any action of the Council requires a minimum of eight affirmative votes to pass. If there are two absences, every voting matter requires a unanimous vote to be effective. This is not sustainable. The new governor must make the appointment of qualified, dedicated, and supportive members a priority. The years of neglecting the important work of the Council must be at an end.

In addition to providing the Council with a full membership, the other imperative issues facing the Highlands must also be addressed. The Highlands Council is operating with half of its pre-2011 budget for both operations and municipal grants. The Council is short-staffed and no matter how talented and dedicated the women and men who work here are, adequate personnel to address agricultural issues, deal with the challenges of climate change, work on land conservation and stewardship issues, and manage the critical water resources of the region need to be hired. Funding for stewardship and land management practices needs to be provided. A dedicated source of funding to protect the 230 square miles of the Highlands that remains undeveloped but developable must be put in place. If New Jersey is truly committed to the protection of the Highlands and its resources, these actions are just the bare minimum of what needs to be allocated. The mission of the Highlands Council is not partisan or political; it is an essential function of good government practice. I will say yet again and repeat it until the appropriate commitment of funds and other assets necessary to protect the Highlands is made, there are few more fundamental responsibilities of government than ensuring the drinking water supply of the people it serves is properly protected. The healthy and prosperous future of the state depends on that commitment.

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 approved scopes of work and eligible for reimbursement.

- **Mountain Lakes Borough, Morris County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Peapack and Gladstone Borough, Somerset County.** RMP Conformance Assessment
- **Somerset County.** County Watershed Management Program

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.

- **Alpha Borough, Warren County.** Highlands Center Planning tasks including updates to the borough Master Plan, Land Use Plan and Circulation Plan elements

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.

- **Milford Borough, Hunterdon County.** Plan Conformance Assessment
- **Mountain Lakes Borough, Morris County.** Environmental Resource Inventory
- **Roxbury Township, Morris County.** Highlands Master Plan Element, Highlands Land Use Ordinance
- **Union Township, Hunterdon County.** Master Plan Reexamination Report, Highlands Master Plan Element, and Highlands Ordinance Adoption

Other Notable Implementation Activities

- **Tourism Expansion Grant Approval: Lake Hopatcong Wayfinding Improvements.** In September, the Highlands Council approved a grant award of \$8,600 to the Borough of Hopatcong and the Lake Hopatcong Foundation (LHF) for a program to increase ecotourism in the area through enhancement to outdoor activity wayfinding on roadways, hiking trails, and kayak launch points. 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 LHF and the Borough of Hopatcong.
- **New Jersey Highlands Council Comments Incorporated into State Plan.** The Highlands Council received a final draft of the State Development and Redevelopment Plan, which incorporated submitted comments focused on ensuring consistency between state plan mapping and Highlands RMP mapping.

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).

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP). Washington Township Municipal Utilities Authority (WTMUA), Sylvan Circle Water System Improvements.**

Washington Township, Morris County

The WTMUA will install new water main on Sylvan Circle to loop the Fawnridge Drive Development and provide redundancy to the water distribution network. The proposed project does not facilitate the extension of utilities or additional service areas and merely improves the function of existing infrastructure. No Highlands resources will be affected.

Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the Goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act

- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) amendment review. Headley Farms Estates, Inc.**

Clinton Township, Hunterdon County

Clinton Township is seeking a site-specific amendment to the Upper Raritan WQMP to accommodate a residential development within the township. The proposed project involves the construction of 400 residential units and a club house on a 155-acre site zoned for affordable housing. The entire parcel is within a Highlands Designated Center with portions delineated as Highlands Environmental Resource Zones (HERZ). The areas outside of the HERZ are eligible for sewer service and the proposed development footprint does not disturb the HERZ. Two stormwater management basins exist along the southern end of the property.

Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the Highlands Act and RMP, subject to the preparation, adoption and implementation of a Water Use and Conservation Management Plan (WUCMP).

Science Initiatives

- **Climate Change Technical Report for the New Jersey Highlands.** The deadline for submitting responses to a Request for Proposals (RFP) to prepare a Climate Change Technical Report for the Highlands region passed on September 10. The Highlands Council received six (6)

responses and is currently interviewing potential project teams. The project will involve compiling and reviewing existing climate data and projections relevant to the Highlands region, assessing potential impacts of climate change on the region's key resources, and recommending adaptation and resilience strategies. The findings will support future amendments to the RMP.

- **State Forest Action Plan.** At the request of NJDEP, Highlands Council staff are currently preparing inter-agency comments on an updated New Jersey State Forest Action Plan.
- **Stream Restoration Project – Lamington (Black) River, Morris County.** In early September, science team members revisited the site of a stream restoration project along a section of the Lamington River (also known as the Black River) in Washington and Chester Townships, Morris County, to observe ongoing activities.



The project, approved under a Highlands General Permit #1 and funded through a federal Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) grant from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), aims to enhance wildlife habitat and improve water quality by increasing pool depths, creating riffles to support aquatic insect production, and adding thermal refuge areas where coldwater tributaries enter the main river, benefiting both wild and stocked trout populations. Highlands Science and GIS staff conducted baseline habitat assessments, including a macroinvertebrate survey, prior to the start of in-stream work. Summer conditions, characterized by lower-than-average precipitation and reduced stream flow, underscored the importance of adding depth and thermal refuge to this section of the river to support native trout and other aquatic species.

***Photo caption:** This deep-water pool, created as part of the restoration project, adds much-needed depth and cool-water refuge to a shallow section of the Lamington River.*

Staffing and Staff Development

- **Welcome Maria Vignali.** In September, Maria Vignali joined the Highlands Council team in the role of Administrative Assistant/Receptionist. Maria brings extensive operations and administrative experience to the team.

Outreach & Education

- **North Jersey Rivers Conference, Friday, October 17, 2025.** The Highlands Council will have an informational table at the annual [North Jersey Rivers conference](#) hosted by the New Jersey Highlands Coalition. The event takes place at the David and Carol Lackland Center at Centenary University in Hackettstown.

- **Harvest, Honey and Garlic Festival, Saturday, October 18, 2025.** The Highlands Council will have an informational table at the [14th Annual Sussex County Harvest, Honey and Garlic Festival](#) at the Sussex County Fairgrounds in Augusta. The event is organized by our partners at the Sussex County Planning Department.
- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 16 inquiries from constituents in September.

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 September, the Highlands Council met with Chester Borough, Morris County (Affordable Housing Plan); Harding Township, Morris County (RMP implementation); Holland Township, Hunterdon County (Affordable Housing Plan); Greenwich Township, Warren County (RMP implementation). Staff also attended the Warren County Board of Agriculture Annual Legislative Meeting.

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.

- In September, Highlands Council staff met with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (various projects and matters); the City of Newark (watershed lands management); Fair Share Housing Center; Lake Hopatcong Commission. Staff members also attended meetings of: the State Planning Commission and the Interagency Council on Climate Resilience.

Council Committee Meetings

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

Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The October Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, October 16. There is no public meeting in November, and the next public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, December 11, 2025. All meetings are held at 4 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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