

# Highlands Council Update

January/February 2025

*Released March 10, 2025*



Ice Fishing tents on Monksville Reservoir, Ringwood Borough, Passaic County

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# Highlands Council Update Report

*Summary of Activities* | January/February 2025

## From the Executive Director

As we turn the page to 2025, there are both old and new challenges facing the Highlands. First, **the drought of the past seven months continues**. Although some rain and winter snow has lessened the severity of the drought, conditions remain abnormally dry. Stream flows are low, reservoir levels are well below normal, and the threat of wildfire is upon us again.

At the time of this report, there are significant fires burning in the central and southern portions of New Jersey and if conditions don't change, it is likely there will be another fire in the Highlands this Spring. 2023 saw a fire larger than 1,000 acres consume forests in the Newark Watershed lands of the Highlands, and 2024 brought a fire of over 3,000 acres to the Wanaque watershed. The effect of wildfire on water quality is a new issue for the Highlands and the rest of the northeastern U.S. Changes to re-generating forests following fires, runoff that contains high levels of carbon and heavy metals, impacts to groundwater recharge and the introduction of substances to drinking water supplies that existing treatment systems were not designed to handle are all known, but barely accounted for, consequences.

For this reason, and because we know these climate change-driven challenges will continue, the Highlands Council is working to develop partnerships with the City of Newark and the North Jersey Water Supply District, both operators of major water systems in the region, to study the impacts of the two aforementioned wildfires. This is part of a more comprehensive effort to understand the state of Highlands forests and take steps to manage them for their water protection characteristics. The best available science tells us that forest canopy coverage and forest soil health are the two main predictors of water quality, water quantity, and water timing. The Highlands region – throughout this drought and others – continues to export approximately 840 million gallons of water every day. Given the importance of the Highlands region to the state's water supply, properly managing Highlands forests is critical to New Jersey's climate resilience.

Next, we know that **Affordable Housing compliance is still a priority for Highlands municipalities**. By now, towns should have responded to the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) estimates of municipal obligations and started the process of drafting their new Fair Share plans. Of the 88 municipalities in the Highlands region, we know that 69 met the January 31 deadline for response to DCA. Of those, 59 filed to modify their estimates, including 11 fully conforming towns. Conforming municipalities in the Highlands are treated differently under the new Affordable Housing legislation and have the ability to consider Highlands resources when drafting Fair Share plans.

To make this as easy as possible for our constituent municipalities, the Highlands Council created an online build-out portal tool, guidance materials, and a grant program. Our work on this front began over a year ago and has been discussed in this report frequently. Many municipalities in the Highlands began taking advantage of this assistance as soon as it was available last fall. Further down in this report you'll see many municipalities that have started work more recently. In all, 19 municipalities have requested this grant funding, 18 have been approved and one request is pending. The importance of doing this correctly

in the region that supplies drinking water to 70% of the state's residents, including 8 out of every 10 people living in an overburdened community, cannot be overstated. Highlands municipalities that chose not to work with the Highlands Council when it comes to affordable housing are missing an incredible opportunity.

Finally, I feel it is important to address **the role of science in government operations and policies**, as it has been coming under attack recently at the federal level. Good government requires a sound foundation in science to ensure that the very real and complicated challenges we face as a society are addressed in an intelligent and efficient manner. While politics and influence will never be eliminated from the day-to-day operations of government agencies, taking actions that are based on objective data and sound scientific principles is essential.

The complex task of managing the vital resources of the Highlands Region for the use of the state's residents that depend upon them while still providing for the needs of the 850,000 people who live in the Highlands demands that sound science be the guiding force for making critical decisions. The health of the region's forests, the quality of the region's waterways, the impacts of a changing climate and the economics of the agricultural industry are just some of the scientifically based issues that we face. The need to implement sound unbiased policies that are reliant upon objectively derived information is critical to the success of the Highlands Council's mission. We are committed to following the facts and following the law and applying good judgement to everything that we do. The loss of institutional knowledge and scientific expertise at the Federal level only highlights the importance of the work of the Highlands Council.



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 approved scopes of work and eligible for reimbursement.

- **Allamuchy Township, Warren County.** Open Space and Recreation Plan
- **Clinton Township, Hunterdon County.** Highlands Land Use Ordinance
- **Hope Township, Warren County.** MS4 Permit compliance tasks
- **Hunterdon County.** Tourism, Digital Marketing and Advertising Campaign
- **Jefferson Township, Morris County.** Wastewater Management Plan, Sewer Study; Habitat Management Plan, Trout Study
- **Mountain Lakes Borough, Morris County.** RMP conformance assessment
- **Roxbury Township, Morris County.** Lake Management – Landing Channel Dredging and Reuse Feasibility Study

## 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.

- **Allamuchy Township, Warren County.** RMP conformance assessment
- **Belvidere, Warren County.** RMP conformance assessment
- **Bernardsville Borough, Somerset County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan, Highlands Element, Master Plan Reexamination, Highlands Conformance Ordinances, Highlands Center Feasibility Study
- **Byram Township, Sussex County.** MS4 Permit compliance tasks
- **Town of Clinton, Hunterdon County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan, Sustainable Economic Development – Streetscape Improvement Plan
- **Greenwich Township, Warren County.** RMP conformance assessment
- **Hunterdon County.** Sustainable Economic Development – Tourism
- **Mount Olive Township, Morris County.** Water Quality and Aquatic Habitat study, Budd Lake Watershed
- **West Milford Township, Passaic County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan, MS4 Permit compliance tasks

In addition to those noted above, the following municipalities also received approval for **Housing Element and Fair Share Plans** scopes of work.

### Hunterdon County

- Lebanon Township
- Holland Township
- Glen Gardner Borough
- Tewksbury Township

### Morris County

- Chester Township
- Harding Township
- Jefferson Township
- Rockaway Township

### Passaic County

- Ringwood Borough

### Sussex County

- Vernon Township

### Warren County

- Pohatcong Township

## Scopes/Funding Requests

The following municipalities submitted scopes of work for the specified projects. The scopes are currently being reviewed by Highlands Council staff.

- **Borough of Califon, Hunterdon County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Borough of High Bridge, Hunterdon County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Hunterdon County.** Musconetcong River Watershed Management Plan, Year 2

## Other Notable Implementation Activities

- **Petitions Posted for Public Comment.** The municipalities of Netcong Borough in Morris County and Union Township in Hunterdon County are petitioning the Highlands Council for plan conformance. Public comments on these requests are being accepted through Friday, March 21, 2025. Public Notices for both were posted in February.
  - [PUBLIC NOTICE: Public Comments Sought - Netcong Borough Petition for Plan Conformance for Highlands Center designation](#)
  - [PUBLIC NOTICE: Public Comments Sought – Union Township Petition for Plan Conformance](#)
- **Bethlehem Township, Hunterdon County.** Bethlehem Township has adopted a Land Use Plan Element related to the Route 173 Corridor and proposed an Ordinance Amending and Revising Chapter 102, “Land Use and Development” of the Township Code to incorporate provisions of the Plan. The Highlands Council has reviewed the documents and found them consistent with the Highlands Act and RMP.
- **Far Hills Borough, Somerset County.** Passed a resolution in January indicating the municipality’s intent to work with the Highlands Council to revise the Borough’s master plan and development regulations so they align with the Highlands RMP.
- **Regional Branding Project Community Workshops.** The Highlands Council held workshops in Clinton and Morris Township to provide members of the community an update on the project and get input on the project progress.

## 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).

- **Conditions Compliance.**  
**20-30 Lanidex Plaza West - Planting**  
*Parsippany-Troy Hills, Morris County*  
The Highlands Council received materials related to a consistency determination made in June of 2024. The applicant has provided updated information regarding landscape planning and hazardous materials management.  
*Highlands Council staff finding: all conditions met with the exception of submission of final approved site plan set.*
- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) review.**  
**Site-Specific WQMP Amendment, Policastro Residential Development**  
*Roxbury Township, Morris County*  
Applicant is seeking a site-specific amendment to the Upper Raritan WQMP Area to accommodate the development of six multi-family buildings and one recreational building. Project will produce a total of 251 residential units, including 20% affordable.  
*Highlands Council staff finding: inconsistent with the Highlands Act and RMP.*
- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) review.**  
**Site-Specific WQMP Amendment, Hercules Residential Development**  
*Roxbury Township, Morris County*



Applicant is seeking a site-specific amendment to the Upper Raritan WQMP Area to accommodate development of 12 multi-family buildings totaling 192 residential units, including 20% affordable.

*Highlands Council staff finding: inconsistent with the Highlands Act and RMP.*

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP).**

- Veolia Water New Jersey, Inc. Bald Eagle Commons - Well P-2 Modifications**

- West Milford Township, Passaic County*

- Viola Water New Jersey is seeking an [Exemption 11](#) from the NJDEP to complete improvements to an existing well. The project will occur on the existing well footprint and no Highlands resources will be affected.

- Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent with the Goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act.*

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP).**

- Moosepac Well PFAS Treatment**

- Jefferson Township, Morris County*

- Jefferson Township is seeking an [Exemption 11](#) from the NJDEP to construct a PFAS treatment system at their Moospac well on Chamberlain Road. No Highlands resources will be affected by this project.

- Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent with the Goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act.*

- **Highlands Planning Area Exemption, Exemption #4**

- Comcast Cable Communications Management, LLC Data-Processing Facility**

- Town of Clinton, Hunterdon County*

- Applicant is seeking an [Exemption 4](#) to make improvements to the site of a former bank in the Town of Clinton. The proposed project involves the demolition of a drive-up bank canopy and construction of an access ramp at the rear of the building. The proposed project will not expand any impervious coverage.

- Highlands Council staff finding: Exempt*

- **Highlands Planning Area Consistency Review.**

- Pohatcong Heights Apartments**

- Pohatcong Township, Warren County*

- The site currently contains a two-story brick schoolhouse. Applicant proposes to construct four (4) three-story multifamily buildings and associated site improvements to service this use.

- Highlands Council staff review in progress.*

## GIS Updates

- **Interactive ERI: State Plan Cross Acceptance Inventory Report (CAIR) Instructions Added.** The Highlands Council [Interactive ERI](#) now includes instructions for using the tool to create important components of a municipal CAIR. A CAIR can help a municipality identify important environmental features such as forests, critical wildlife habitat, open waters, and open waters protection areas to inform land use and decision making in the cross acceptance process.
- **Interactive ERI: Map Export Enhancement.** In addition to creating pre-defined maps in the [Interactive ERI](#), users can now define the print area, title and file format.

## Land Preservation Program Updates

- **HDC Allocation Request**
  - Byram Township, Sussex County. Multiple blocks and lots totaling approximately 1,000 acres.

## Staffing and Staff Development

- **Welcome Kyli Engle.** In February, the Highlands Council welcomed Kyli Engle to the team filling the role of part-time communications specialist. Kyli brings social media and marketing promotions experience to the Council.
- **Seeking GIS Specialist.** The Highlands Council is currently seeking an experienced GIS professional to assist the Highlands Council in implementation of the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act and the Highlands Regional Master Plan. This is a full-time position based in Chester, NJ. Applications are being accepted through Friday, March 28, 2025. Complete details are available in the [job posting](#).

## Outreach & Education

- **Watershed Institute Conference.** Highlands Council Science Manager, Kelley Curran moderated a panel discussion and presented at the Eighth Annual NJ Watershed Conference, on Friday, February 21. The session, “Watershed Plans as a Roadmap for Protection,” also featured Dr. Christopher C. Obropta of the NJ Water Resources Institute at Rutgers University, Kathy Hale from the NJ Water Supply Authority, and Dr. Kristi Mac Donald of Raritan Headwaters Association.
- **State Plan Municipal Cross Acceptance.** On Thursday, February 20, the Office of Planning Advocacy (OPA) hosted a public information session at the Highlands Council office to review the Preliminary Draft of the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan and discuss the cross acceptance process.
- **NJDEP Highlands Application Process Outreach.** On Tuesday, February 11, NJDEP staff invited Highlands municipal officials, planners and engineers to attend an informative session regarding the various rules and regulatory aspects of NJDEP’s role in Highlands Act implementation. The event was held at the Highlands Council office in Chester.

## 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. The following is a summary of meetings and events attended since the last report.

- **Passaic County.** Vreeland House project in Ringwood
- **Chester Township, Morris County.** Affordable Housing
- **Ringwood Borough, Passaic County.** Skyline Drive project
- **Jefferson Township, Morris County.** Jefferson Trail Projects
- **Warren County Agriculture Development Board (WCADB).** Executive Director Ben Spinelli attended the WCADB dinner in January

- **Warren County.** Highlands Council staff attended the State Planning Commission public meeting held in Warren County regarding the cross acceptance process for the updated State Development and Redevelopment Plan.

## 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. Following is a summary of collaborations since the last report.

- **Office of Planning Advocacy (OPA).** Coordination regarding the State Development and Redevelopment Plan public outreach meetings regarding the cross-acceptance process. More information about the update to the State Plan is available on [the OPA website](#).
- **New Jersey Conservation Foundation.** Land preservation in the Highlands region.
- **NJ Department of Agriculture.** Farm Conservation Plans and Agricultural Development in the Highlands.
- **North Jersey District Water Supply Commission/Montclair State University.** Discussion regarding Jennings Creek wildfire and implications for water quality.
- **Rutgers University.** Climate considerations in the next RMP Update.
- **West Milford Environmental Commission.** Highlands Council staff met with the organization to discuss the Highlands Region Open Space & Recreation Plan.
- **Board of Public Utilities, Clean Energy.** The Highlands Council provided comments on the New Jersey Energy Storage Incentive Program, suggesting changes to ensure consideration of Highlands resources in siting guidance and to incorporate incentives for brownfield and other redevelopment projects.
- **North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority, Inc (NJTPA).** Per a request from NJTPA, the Highlands Council provided a list of regional planning projects currently undertaken by the Highlands Council.
- **Watershed and Land Management, Division of Water Supply and Geoscience.** The Highlands Council is coordinating with NJDEP to formalize the joint review of Water Allocation Permits in the Highlands. The established process and Standard Operating Procedures that have been in place since 2015 will be formalized via an interagency Memorandum of Understanding.

## Council Committee Meetings

- Budget and Finance Committee (January)
- Audit Committee (February)



## Legislative Update

Following is a summary of recent legislative updates related to the work of the Highlands Council.

Highlands-Specific Legislation			
Bill Number	Prime Sponsors	Bill Summary	Bill Status
<a href="#">S4102 / A5256</a>	McKeon, John F., Smith, Bob, Collazos-Gill, Alixon.	Allocates \$7.5 million annually of constitutionally dedicated CBT revenue for preservation of land in Highlands Region.	2/3/2025: Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee.  2/10/2025: Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment, Natural Resources, and Solid Waste Committee
<a href="#">S3466 / A4627</a>	McKeon, John F. Greenstein, Linda R. Collazos-Gill, Alixon DiMaio, John	Extends expiration date of special appraisal process for Green Acres and farmland preservation program; provides aid for watershed lands. Provides for a \$7.5 million annual allocation of constitutionally dedicated Corporation Business Tax (CBT) revenue to the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council for the preservation of land in the Highlands Region.	The Senate committee amendments on 12/12/24 deleted sections 3 through 5 of the bill, which would have provided for a \$7.5 million annual allocation of constitutionally dedicated CBT revenue to the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council for the preservation of land in the Highlands Region.  1/14/2025: Passed by the Senate (35-0).  1/30/2025: Substituted for A4627 (1R).  1/30/2025: Passed Assembly (Passed Both Houses) (75-0-0).
Highlands-Related Legislation			
Bill Number	Prime Sponsors	Bill Summary	Bill Status
<a href="#">S3922/A5120</a>	Zwicker, Andrew Turner, Shirley K. Peterpaul, Luanne M., Esq. Verrelli, Anthony S. Moen, William F., Jr.	Appropriates \$18,518,738 from constitutionally dedicated CBT revenues to NJ Historic Trust for grants for certain historic preservation projects and associated administrative expenses.	1/30/2025 Approved P.L.2025, c.12.
<a href="#">S3936/A5119</a>	Singleton, Troy Johnson, Gordon M. Drulis, Michelle Sampson, William B., IV Murphy, Carol A.	Appropriates \$60 million from constitutionally dedicated CBT revenues for recreation and conservation purposes to DEP for State capital and park development projects.	1/30/2025 Approved P.L.2025, c.13.

<a href="#">A5121/S3943</a>	Katz, Andrea Egan, Kevin P. Collazos-Gill, Alixon Vitale, Joseph F. Diegnan, Patrick J., Jr.	Appropriates \$49.5 million from constitutionally dedicated CBT revenues to DEP for State acquisition of lands for recreation and conservation purposes, including Blue Acres projects, and Green Acres Program administrative costs.	1/30/25 Approved P.L.2025, c.16.
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## Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The March Highlands Council public meeting scheduled for Thursday, March 20 has been cancelled. The April public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, April 17. All meetings are held at 4 p.m. at the Highlands Council office in Chester, NJ. Complete details are available on the [calendar page](#) of the Highlands Council website.

