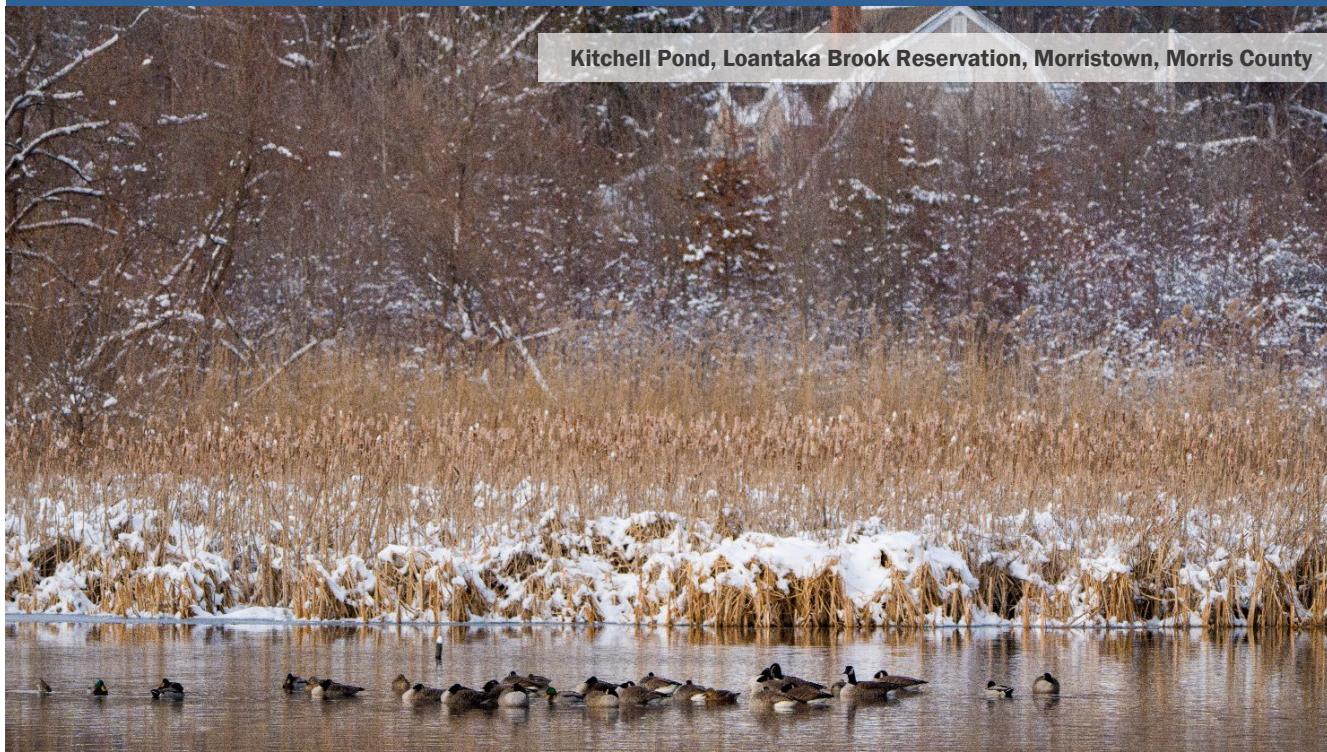


Highlands Council Update

January 2026

Released February 10, 2026

Kitchell Pond, Loantaka Brook Reservation, Morristown, Morris County



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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | January 1-31, 2026

From the Executive Director

The Drought Continues. This is getting repetitious. Drought in the winter can be deceiving. Right now, the Highlands region is covered in snow. The lakes and reservoirs, and even the streams of the region, are covered in ice. This hides the problems we are facing. The reality is that January 2026 was another month of below normal precipitation in the Highlands extending our streak to 21 of the past 25 months. The snowpack sitting on the ground is good news for agricultural interests and anyone who relies on well water. Melting snow will raise both soil moisture and groundwater levels. However, with a rain to snow ratio of 10-20 inches of snow per inch of rain (and this last storm was closer to 20:1), the snow currently sitting on the ground only represents between 1 and 1 ½ inches of liquid precipitation. When combined with the lone rainfall event of less than ½ inch earlier in the month, this represents an additional rainfall deficit of around 1 ½ inches tagged on to our long-term deficit dating back to January 2024. This extended dry period should raise some alarms.

Day Zero Drought (DZD) is defined as an acute water scarcity event driven by a compound multi-year hydrological drought, during which water demand exceeds water supply under prolonged drought conditions. DZD occurs due to a critical imbalance between supply and demand, driven both by climate-induced reduction in supply and the pressures of increasing demand. It was an occurrence that faced Cape Town, South Africa in 2018 and looms over many other locations, including the Colorado River Basin in the western U.S. Hopefully this will never be an issue for New Jersey. However, as we enter 2026, the now two-year stretch of below normal precipitation continues, and it is prudent to consider how a densely populated state like New Jersey manages its water supplies to ensure scenarios that are playing out in other parts of the world can be avoided here. Hope is not a strategy.

Despite these ongoing drought conditions, the Highlands region continues to export approximately 860 million gallons of water each day. The down cycles in precipitation patterns are challenging and will only become more so as demand for Highlands water outside of the region increases. The traditional response to drought has been to take measures to reduce water demand. Certainly, scarcity needs to be addressed in the moment. However, for the long term, this is not a demand problem. The answer is not shorter showers and lawn watering bans. The protection of land from development, increasing overall forest coverage, 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 and avoid ever having to face a Day Zero occurrence.

Winter Salt Applications. Speaking of snow and cold, this recent period of snow, ice, and bitterly cold temperatures has resulted in the application of salt and other melting agents on the region's roadways, parking lots, and sidewalks. January 26-30 was "Winter Salt Awareness" week, and here in the Highlands

the impacts to our waterways and drinking water supplies from de-icing applications are a particular concern. All of that salt has to go somewhere, and when it rains and the snow and ice melt it will be carried into our rivers and streams. One teaspoon of salt can permanently pollute 5 gallons of water. Consider that you can measure the amount of salt applied to surfaces in the Highlands during each winter weather event in the hundreds of tons. Take into account that every drop of water that falls in the region ends up in a source of drinking water – whether that be a surface reservoir, river, or groundwater – and the need to be careful about how much salt we use becomes obvious.

Staying safe during winter weather conditions is a necessity. However, we can be smarter about how we accomplish this. Better practices employed by the state, counties, and municipalities when it comes to road maintenance during winter weather events can make a big difference. They can also translate into substantial cost savings. Municipal officials and employees, and in particular those working in public works and road departments, can visit the [Winter Salt Week website](#) where they will find webinars that discuss both the impacts of excessive or indiscriminate salt applications and solutions for avoiding those impacts, along with model ordinances and policies to help deal with this problem.

Improving our practices in maintaining roads during winter, something that is front and center during this particular frigid stretch of weather, just makes sense. However, in the Highlands, it is of heightened importance. We know from periodic testing of streams during rainstorms or periods of warm weather that cause snow and ice to melt, that there are spikes in the amount of salt and other chlorides in Highlands waterways. These chemicals inevitably find their way into drinking water sources where treatment systems are not really designed to remove them. They also have negative impacts on vegetation, fish, and other aquatic wildlife, infrastructure, as well as our vehicles.

Funding for the Highlands. Another month, another call for providing the Highlands with appropriate funding to carry out this agency's vital mission of protecting the region's resources and the state's water supply. It's budget season and the time to make the investment in the Highlands is now. The good news is that it doesn't take a lot – relatively speaking. We don't need to spend \$108 million per year as New York City does protecting its water supply. An increase in the Highlands Council budget of less than \$1 million per year would allow the addition of staff to address key policy issues like agriculture, climate change, water resource management, land preservation, land stewardship, and ecological restoration. That's a modest but necessary measure.

The real work of preserving some of the 230 square miles of the region that remain vulnerable to development, restoring degraded environmental resources, and working with both public and private landowners to engage in practices that would increase forest coverage, reduce the impact of current land use practices, foster sustainable economic development in the region, and support Highlands municipalities in fulfilling their roles in protecting the state's water supply will take substantial funding. Fortunately, the sources of money for these activities already exist. Access to the substantial Corporate Business Tax revenues that have been constitutionally set aside for land preservation and stewardship, Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) funds for forestry and ecological restoration, and the Realty Transfer Tax revenues (originally dedicated in part to the Highlands Protection Fund) are all available. A

dedicated allocation of these funds for use in the Highlands region would solve this problem and allow the Highlands Council to carry out the work of protecting the water supply for 7 million New Jersey residents.

If the current drought doesn't catch anyone's attention regarding the importance of this work for the future of the state, I don't know what will. It is well past the time when the political leaders representing the Highlands region *where the water originates*, and those representing the rest of the state *where the water is consumed*, join forces and recognize the symbiotic relationship between the Highlands and the rest of New Jersey. An investment in the Highlands is an investment in New Jersey's future. We need to both protect the water supply and support the communities that protect that water. It means that there must be a bi-partisan effort to bring the funding to the Highlands that will ensure a healthy and prosperous future for New Jersey. In the nation's most densely populated state, we can't ignore the fact that we are all in this together. The urban areas of New Jersey simply could not exist without the resources of the Highlands and the rural areas of the state thrive because the urbanized areas are an economic powerhouse. It's a simple concept. We need to act on this truth and act on it now.



Ben Spinelli
Executive Director

New Highlands Council Members

The Highlands Council welcomed seven new members at its January public meeting and said farewell to retiring member Michael Francis. See the [press release](#) for complete details.



(LEFT) New Highlands Council Members with Highlands Council Chairman Carl Richko. **L to R:** Joseph Basralian, Mary J. Amoroso, Kelley Smith, Matthew Oswald, Melonie Marano, Helen Le Frois, Tammy Koop, Chairman Richko. **(RIGHT)** Retiring Council Member Michael Francis receiving recognition plaque. **L to R:** Highlands Council Treasurer Jim Visioli, Highlands Council Chairman Carl Richko, Michael Francis.

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.

- **Hope Township, Warren County.** MS4 Permitting Compliance/Stormwater Management Plan
- **Jefferson Township, Morris County.** Habitat Conservation Plan: Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Survey
- **Lebanon Township, Hunterdon County.** Draft Forestry Management Plan
- **Peapack and Gladstone Borough, Somerset County.** RMP Conformance Assessment
- **Ringwood Borough, Passaic County.** MS4 Permitting Compliance

Scopes/Funding Requests

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

- **Green Township, Sussex County.** Lake Tranquility Drainage Study

Municipal Requests to Align with the RMP

- **Mendham Borough, Morris County Petition Approval.** Mendham Borough is located entirely in the Planning Area of the Highlands region, where alignment with the Highlands RMP is voluntary. In 2025, the borough 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 January public meeting.

Other Notable Implementation Activities

- **EPA Brownfields Grant.** The Highlands Council submitted a proposal in the 2026 Brownfields Community-Wide Assessment for States and Tribes Grant funding program. If secured, the requested funding of \$2 million will be used for preliminary analysis and planning to support future remediation and redevelopment of brownfield sites identified in Phillipsburg and Oxford Township in Warren County, Holland Township in Hunterdon County, and Ringwood Borough in Passaic County.

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).

- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment. 188 Stryker Road, Block 99 Lots 3.01 & 6**

Lopatcong Township, Warren County

A previously issued consistency determination regarding this amendment was deemed no longer valid as a result of Lopatcong Township's lack of progress on implementation of a designated

Highlands Center.

Communicated to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) and the municipality.

- **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 Finding: Consistent with the Highlands Act and RMP

- **Conditions Compliance: Stryker Road Associates, LLC, Meadow Restoration Monitoring Lopatcong Township, Warren County**

The Highlands Council received the third and final annual monitoring report related to a meadow restoration project associated with a consistency determination issued by the Highlands Council in 2019. As a component of the project, actively farmed/disturbed areas within the riparian zone of Lopatcong Creek were restored to meadow conditions.

Highlands Council Staff review of report in progress.

Land Preservation Program Updates

Highlands Development Credit (HDC) Easement Compliance. Highlands Council staff conducted three HDC property inspections in January. All sites were found to be in compliance with the terms of the easements.

Outreach & Education

- **New Jersey County Planners Association.** Highlands Council Planning Manager Maryjude Haddock-Weiler was a featured guest speaker at the New Jersey County Planner Association January meeting. She provided the Association with information about the Highlands Council's Economic Sustainability Plan and regional branding and marketing efforts.
- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to eight inquiries from constituents in January.

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 January, the Highlands Council met with Warren County (RMP Implementation); Somerset County (Sewer Service Areas); Lopatcong Township, Warren County (Highlands Center Planning); Hunterdon County Historic Preservation Plan Advisory Committee meeting; Passaic County (tourism and economic development); Morris County (County Chamber of Commerce); Peapack and Gladstone (RMP implementation, larger properties in borough); Netcong Borough (Highlands Center planning)

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 January, Highlands Council staff met with or participated in events with the following agencies and organizations: NJDEP (quarterly coordination meeting, pre-application meetings); Governor's Authorities Unit Transition Team; New Jersey Interagency Climate Council (monthly senior staff meeting); the Trust for Public Land (Highlands 20/20); New York-New Jersey Trail Conference (Accessible Trail Construction); New Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (data set coordination); Mendham Alliance for Preservation and Conservation (Headwaters Guardian Act)

Council Committee Meetings

- The Budget & Finance and Plan Conformance Committees met in January.

Legislative Update

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

Highlands Specific Legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
S2349 / A3749	McKeon, John F. Smith, Bob Collazos-Gill, Alixon Kennedy, James J.	Allocates \$7.5 million annually of constitutionally dedicated CBT revenue for preservation of land in Highlands Region.	1/13/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee 1/13/2026 Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee
S2299 / A3718	McKeon, John F. Collazos-Gill, Alixon	Creates Highlands Conservation Trust to preserve land in Highlands Region and authorizes Highlands conservation license plate to raise revenue therefor.	1/13/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee 1/13/2026 Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee
A144	Fantasia, Dawn Inganamort, Michael	Provides for direct property tax relief from Highlands Property Tax Stabilization Fund.	1/13/2026 Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee
A3217	Webber, Jay	Requires distribution of State aid to certain municipalities located in whole or in part in the Highlands preservation area.	1/13/2026 Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee
S346	Steinhardt, Douglas J.	Extends for five years expiration date of special appraisal process for Green Acres program and farmland preservation program for lands in Highlands Region.	1/13/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee

Highlands Related Legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
S5007 / A5778	Turner, Shirley K. Spearman, William W.	Directs Garden State Preservation Trust to perform audit of State's land preservation programs, authorizes local governments and nonprofit organizations to utilize certain constitutionally dedicated CBT revenues for administrative expenses; appropriates \$150,000.	1/12/2026 Senate Bill - Substituted by A5778 1/20/2026 Approved P.L.2025, c.385.
S3446/A6278	Pennacchio, Joseph Bucco, Anthony M. Spearman, William W.	"Farmland and Woodland Tax Assessment Integrity and Investment Act."	1/12/2026 Senate Bill - Substituted for A6278 (2R) 1/12/2026 Senate Bill - Passed Assembly (Passed Both Houses) (70-1-2) 1/14/2026 Approved P.L.2025, c.274.
S699 / A682	Singer, Robert W. Burzichelli, John J. Kean, Sean T. Fantasia, Dawn Bailey, David, Jr.	Establishes program in SADC for acquisition of development easements on privately-owned woodlands.	1/12/2026 Senate Bill - Substituted for A682 (ACS) 1/12/2026 Senate Bill - Passed Assembly (Passed Both Houses) (68-1-1) 1/20/2026 Approved P.L.2025, c.287.
S2274	Ruiz, M. Teresa Burgess, Renee C.	Requires owner or operator of data center to submit water and energy usage report to BPU.	1/13/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee
S1029 / A4137	Greenstein, Linda R. Smith, Bob Calabrese, Clinton Atkins, Reginald W.	"Invasive Species Management Act"; prohibits sale, distribution, import, export, and propagation of certain invasive species; establishes NJ Invasive Species Council.	1/12/2026 Senate Bill Substituted for A4137 (ACS) 1/12/2026 Passed by the Assembly (75-0-0) 1/12/2026 Received in the Senate, 2nd Reading on Concurrence 1/12/2026 Passed Senate (Passed Both Houses) (39-0) 1/20/2026 Approved P.L.2025, c.290.

Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The February Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, February 19. The March public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, March 19. 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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