

Highlands Council Update

May 2026

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Indigo Bunting, Chester Township, Morris County
photo by Herb August, Highlands Council Grants Manager.

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | May 1-30, 2026

From the Executive Director

WQMP Rules. This is government. We love acronyms. We love rules. This particular example of that passion is quite significant to the work of the Highlands Council, and one that requires some attention at the moment.

First, a bit of background. And hang on, because this might get a bit arcane at times (another government favorite).

The Water Quality Management Planning (WQMP) Rules outline how New Jersey's Water Quality Planning Act of 1977 is implemented. Quick government side note: this is typically how this works – laws (statutes) are passed and then rules (administrative code) are created to explain how the law will work. Together, the WQMP Rules and the Water Quality Planning Act are a big part of how New Jersey meets the requirements of the 1972 federal Clean Water Act, which regulates pollution discharge and sets strict water quality standards for the nation. The WQMP Rules and the Water Quality Planning Act do this by determining where sewer and water utilities can be extended in New Jersey.

This is a key element of planning because most types of development rely on public sewer and water. Areas that do not have these utilities must be served by on-site septic systems and wells. Through the WQMP process, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) issues permits for sewer and water extensions, influencing where dense development can take place and where it cannot.

Although the Highlands Council is not a regulatory agency and does not issue permits, the WQMP Rules, along with a corresponding Highlands Act Rule, require that the NJDEP consult with and follow the recommendation of the Highlands Council when issuing sewer and water extension permits in the Highlands region. The Highlands Act and Regional Master Plan (RMP) prohibit extension of sewer and water utilities in certain sensitive areas, directing more dense development to already-developed areas as identified in the Highlands Land Use Capability Zone mapping.

When the Highlands Act was passed this requirement applied to the entire Highlands region. However, a 2015 amendment to the WQMP rules limited the requirement to the Preservation Area and conforming portions of the Planning Area only. This means that non-conforming Planning Area projects are no longer subject to a review for consistency with the Highlands Act and RMP when sewer or water extension permits are sought. The Highlands review has been limited in those instances to an evaluation of net water availability for the location of the proposed development.

Despite this, over the past three years, Highlands Council staff have completed full RMP consistency reviews (not just net water availability) on all Planning Area project proposals regardless of conformance status. And while the NJDEP has taken the recommendations of the Council into account, the real solution is to restore the WQMP Rules to require consistency with the RMP in both the Preservation and

Planning Areas, regardless of conformance status. This will provide the full intended protections of the Highlands Act to the region's resources and help to fend off inappropriate or damaging developments in non-conforming portions of the region. Conforming or not, the Planning Area of the Highlands contains important resources that need protection.

Science in the Highlands. The Highlands region is federally recognized, contains unique and important ecological features and is a primary source of drinking water for millions of people. It offers the opportunity to study environmental resource protection in a relatively rural setting at the interface with suburban and urban land uses. Despite this, there has been a historic lack of academic and scientific attention on the region beyond the initial studies conducted when the Highlands Act and RMP were being established.

But this is changing. The Highlands Council's science staff recently launched a Highlands Water Quality Monitoring Program designed to augment NJDEP data by filling in gaps in the Highlands region through more frequent monitoring at existing sites and the identification of new sites. We are currently planning the second Highlands Science Symposium to bring together scientists conducting research either in the region or relevant to the work of the Highlands Council, to share their work and findings, and uncover opportunities for collaboration.

We are also actively engaging with the scientific community and academic institutions in the state to encourage new research in the Highlands to better understand the impacts of forest composition, land use conversion, climate change, and other factors that directly affect water quality, quantity, and timing. The Highlands region offers a myriad of subjects to study in a somewhat unique environment. Despite being at the doorstep of the most densely populated areas of the country, the Highlands remains relatively undeveloped and home to an amazing array of flora and fauna. The geology of the Highlands has been recognized as particularly suitable for providing and protecting drinking water supplies. Human activity has shaped the region for over a century and much of the landscape has recovered from intensive logging, mining, and other endeavors and has returned to a wild state. These are all worthy of study and understanding. We will be looking for opportunities to foster research within the region over the coming months.



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.

- **Allamuchy Township, Warren County.** Highlands Conformance Assessment.
- **Bernardsville Borough, Somerset County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan.

- **Mount Olive Township, Morris County.** Habitat Conservation and Lake Management Planning, Baseline Characterization of Water Quality and Aquatic Habitat in Budd Lake - Phase I.

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.

- **Mendham Borough, Morris County.** Open Space and Recreation Master Plan
- **Sparta Township, Sussex County.** Highlands Conformance Assessment.
- **Wharton Borough, Morris County.** Climate Change-Related Hazard Vulnerability Analysis.

Other Notable Implementation Activities

- The **Borough of Bernardsville in Somerset County** was notified that the approval of their amended petition for plan conformance including a Highlands Center Designation by the Highlands Council at its April meeting was now official following the Governor’s review of Highlands Council minutes.

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).**
Brass Castle Creek Crossing Water Main Upgrade
Washington Township, Warren County
 Project proposes to replace an exposed 16-inch diameter cast iron water main that currently crosses above Brass Castle Creek to upgrade the existing utility to modern safety and efficiency standards by installing a new main beneath the creek. An [Exemption #11](#) is required to complete this work.
Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the Goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act
- **Highlands Planning Area Exemption Determination, Exemption #15.**
Berkshire Valley Redevelopment, LLC
Roxbury Township, Morris County
 Working under an NJDEP Administrative Consent Order, the applicant is seeking an [Exemption #15](#) to remediate two areas of concern on a previously developed site. Remediation will include excavation and off-site disposal of debris and impacted soil followed by wetland restoration, a deed notice, and an engineered cap over certain areas of the site.
Highlands Council staff finding: Exempt
- **Highlands Planning Area Exemption Determination, Exemptions #4 and #15.**
Parsippany Road
Parsippany-Troy Hills Township, Morris County

Applicant is seeking an [Exemption #4](#) and an [Exemption #15](#) to remediate and redevelop a previously developed property. Remediation activities will include removal of impervious surface and vegetation as needed to facilitate the excavation of contaminated soils, backfill of excavated areas with clean fill, and underground piping.

Highlands Council staff finding: Exempt

- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment.**

- **Natirar Resort Development, LLC, and Somerset County Improvement Authority**

- Borough of Peapack & Gladstone, Somerset County*

- An amendment to the Upper Raritan WQMP is required to accommodate the expansion of the current facility. The existing sewer service area would be increased by 7.2 acres with a 17,500 gallons per day increase in wastewater.

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

- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment.**

- **Headly Farms Estates**

- Clinton Township, Hunterdon County*

- Applicant is seeking an amendment to the Upper Raritan WQMP and Hunterdon County WMP to accommodate a residential development consisting of 400 units and a 4,000 square foot residential clubhouse. The proposed amendment would establish a new discharge to groundwater sewer service area of 95.9 acres. The project is estimated to generate a wastewater flow of 114,000 gallons per day.

- Highlands Council staff review pending*

- **Planning Area Consistency Review.**

- **Competitive Solar Incentive “CSI” Program Applications**

- White Township, Warren County*

- At the request of the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities (NJBPU), the Highlands Council performed a review of a proposed solar development project located primarily on lands actively devoted to agriculture in the Planning Area of the Highlands region for consistency with the RMP. While there is no direct prohibition on solar projects in the Planning Area, the Highlands Council considers the loss of farmland, especially farmland with valuable soils, a significant threat to the region. To that end, the Highlands Council has provided the NJBPU with recommended conditions that should be applied should an approval for the project be granted.

- **NJDEP Comment Request on General Permit #1: Cole’s Mill Dam Removal**

- Califon Borough, Hunterdon County*

- The United States Fish and Wildlife Service proposes removal of Cole’s Mill Dam to improve habitat and water quality, and to enhance recreational opportunities within the South Branch of the Raritan River. The dam is currently in disrepair.

- Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the Highlands Regional Master Plan.*

GIS Updates

- **Updates to the Highlands Resource Explorer (REX).** A number of usability and accessibility enhancements, along with bug fixes were included in a May update to REX, now in version 2.2. Details regarding the updates are available by clicking “[What’s New](#)” on the main page or via the help menu.

Science Initiatives

- **Highlands Water Quality Monitoring Program Update** Three sites were sampled and analyzed in May; one site each in Morris, Hanover, and Bernards Township. Results were submitted to the New Jersey Watershed Watch Network and will ultimately be incorporated into the [United States Environmental Protection Agency’s Water Quality Portal](#).

Land Preservation Program Updates

- **Two preservation projects approved.** At its May public meeting, the Highlands Council voted to approve the preservation of properties in Mount Olive Township and Mendham Township, both in Morris County. In Mount Olive, 37 acres adjacent to Allamuchy Mountain State Park, the Morris Canal, and the Old Main Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad historic district will be preserved in partnership with The Land Conservancy of New Jersey, NJDEP Green Acres, and the Township of Mount Olive. The Highlands Council is providing 38.5% of the total \$187,800 acquisition cost via a federal Highlands Conservation Act (HCA) grant. In Mendham Township, 11.72 acres adjacent to Lewis Morris Park will be preserved in partnership with Township of Mendham, NJDEP Green Acres, and Morris County, with the Highlands Council providing 24.3% of the \$250,000 acquisition cost leveraging HCA grant funds.
- **Annual inspections of properties preserved under the Highlands Development Credit (HDC) purchase program** continued in May. All 13 sites visited were found to be in compliance with the terms of conservation easements.

Staffing and Staff Development

- **Resource Management Specialist/Forester.** Interviews are complete and a decision is pending for this open position.
- **Information Technology (IT) Coordinator, part-time/hourly.** A total of seven resumes were received and two candidates were interviewed.
- **GIS Intern.** In May, the Highlands Council welcomed Meghan Smith as a summer intern joining our GIS team. Meghan is in the midst of her senior year as an Environmental Studies major at American University.

Outreach, Education & Events

- **Lake Hopatcong Block Party.** Highlands Council staff enjoyed speaking with residents and visitors to the Highlands region at the annual Lake Hopatcong Block Party, held on Saturday, May 16 and presented by the Lake Hopatcong Foundation. The Block Party celebrates all facets of Lake Hopatcong life by bringing visitors together with businesses, non-profit organizations, community groups, crafters, and food vendors for a community day of activities, raffles, giveaways, a children’s

scavenger hunt, and more. It was a great opportunity to share information about the Highlands region tourism brand and the [enjoynjhighlands](https://www.enjoynjhighlands.com) website. Special thanks to the Morris County Tourism Bureau for inviting the Highlands Council to partner with them at this event.



Highlands Council staff shares information about the Highlands Council’s economic sustainability and tourism efforts with visitors at the Lake Hopatcong Block Party. **Left:** Planning Manager Maryjude Haddock Weiler. **Right:** Principal Planner Liz Ward.

- The Highlands Council received and responded to 12 constituent inquiries in May.

Legislative Update

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

Highlands Specific Legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
A4860 / S4118	Sauickie, Alex Dunn, Aura K. Sweeney, Marisa Bucco, Anthony M. Tiver, Latham	"Fairness for School Districts in Development Restricted Areas Act"; provides additional State school aid to certain school districts located in municipalities that are part of Highlands or Pinelands preservation areas.	5/11/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Education Committee 5/4/2026 Introduced, Referred to Assembly Education Committee
A5009 / S1710	DiMaio, John Fantasia, Dawn Space, Parker	Provides "Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act" exemption, and clarifies municipal planning or zoning authority, for certain development along commercial corridors in Highlands Region.	5/7/2026 Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee
A4817 / S1680	Fantasia, Dawn Inganamort, Michael Space, Parker	Allows for exclusion of certain properties from Highlands preservation area.	5/4/2026 Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee

Highlands Related Legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
S1836	Singleton, Troy Wimberly, Benjie E.	"Yes, In God's Backyard Act"; Enhances ability of religious and nonprofit organizations to convert certain property to inclusionary developments with affordable housing; authorizes bonds for \$250 million; appropriates \$50 million.	6/1/2026 Reported from Senate Committee as a Substitute, 2nd Reading 6/1/2026 Referred to Senate State Government, Wagering, Tourism & Historic Preservation Committee
S3258 / A4879	Corrado, Kristin M. Fantasia, Dawn Sauickie, Alex	Increases cap on grants for farmland stewardship activities to \$100,000 per application.	5/4/2026 Introduced, Referred to Assembly Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
S4214	Mukherji, Raj	Codifies finding that greenhouse gas emissions contribute to climate change and endanger public health, safety, welfare, and environment; amends "Air Pollution Control Act (1954)" to define greenhouse gases as air pollutants subject to regulation.	5/11/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee
SR101	McKeon, John F.	Declares New Jersey's natural lands essential infrastructure; recognizes need for land conservation.	5/14/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee

Council & Committee Meetings

- **Committee Meetings.** The RMP Amendment Committee and the Budget and Finance Committee met in May.
- **Public Council Meetings.** The June Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, June 18. The July public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, July 16. 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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