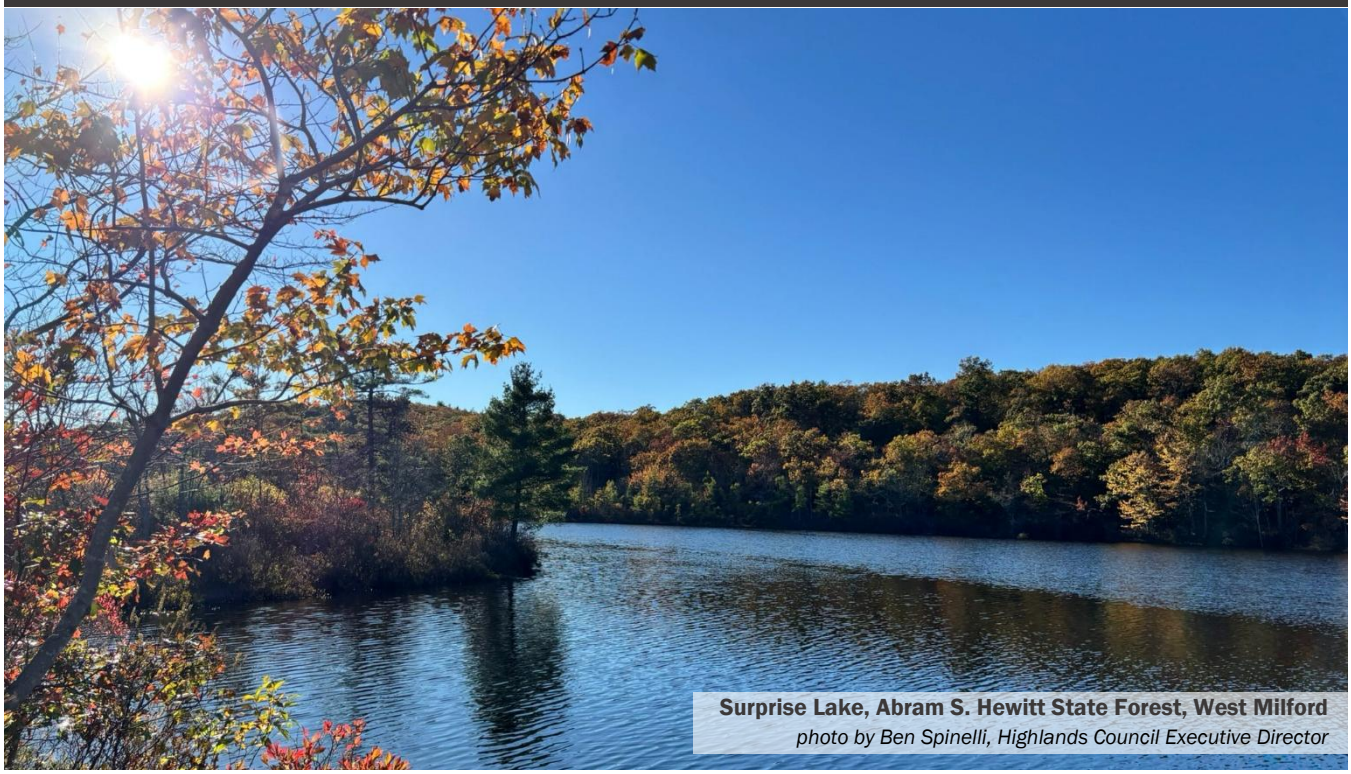
Highlands Council Update

October 2026

Released November 12, 2026



Surprise Lake, Abram S. Hewitt State Forest, West Milford
photo by Ben Spinelli, Highlands Council Executive Director

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | October 1-31, 2026

From the Executive Director

Keeping Our Balance. In October, I had the opportunity to participate in the Rutgers Center for Real Estate's annual symposium. This event brought together leaders in New Jersey's commercial and residential real estate industry to discuss the issues we face in our state as we attempt to find the proper balance between development and preservation. I will repeat here what I told the audience during my panel discussion; the development community has a vested interest in the success of the Highlands Council's mission to protect the resources of the region for future generations. This is a relationship that cannot be denied.

Every new residential unit constructed, every new commercial building, every new manufacturing facility, data center, or warehouse that is built, comes with an invoice. That invoice is payable in gallons of water. If we don't ensure that there is a sufficient balance in the account that satisfies that bill when it becomes due, we will find ourselves with a problem that runs much deeper than construction costs, soft costs, or the time it takes to approve new projects. The nation's most densely populated state must invest in the protection and enhancement of the resources that allow for not just continued intense occupation of the geography of our great state, but also for continued economic growth.

The basic concept that we must accept is that we need to treat 17% of the state's land mass differently than the other 83%. The Highlands exports more than 860 million gallons of water to the rest of the state every day. This provides some or all of the drinking water for approximately 7 million people in 332 of the state's municipalities, as well as the water needed for businesses such as pharmaceutical manufacturing and the food and beverage industry. Add into this equation the state's rising population and the uncertainties of climate change, and you can see that this is not only an essential problem to solve but a difficult and evolving one as well.

When the Highlands Act was passed in 2004 the state's population was around 8.5 million. Projections at the time were that the number of residents would rise to around 9 million by 2025. Right now, New Jersey's population has exceeded 9.5 million with the bulk of the growth occurring in portions of the state that rely on the Highlands for their water supply. This growth in the number of residents comes with an increase in the daily demand for water, and in particular, Highlands water.

If we don't invest appropriately in the protection of the resources of the Highlands (and in the 22-year history of the Highlands Act we have not) the day will come when the bank account that is our water supply will be overdrawn. When that time comes, when we have reached the capacity of our resources to support the demands we place on them, we will have reached the limits of the state to accommodate continued economic growth, let alone provide for the existing needs of its residents.

Protection of the Highlands is not only an environmental issue – it is an essential part of the economic well-being of New Jersey. It is foundational if we hope to maintain our thriving urban and suburban

communities, and vital to the state's overall climate resilience. We must start devoting the necessary resources to the region in a manner that recognizes this vital connection. Our future depends on it.

Implementing the Highlands Region Branding and Marketing Plan. While we're on the subject of sustainable economic growth, we continue to move forward with an important initiative identified in the Highlands Region Economic Sustainability Plan released in 2022. Development and implementation of a Highlands region brand and associated marketing plan allows the Highlands Council to advance key goals related to ensuring the economic vitality of the New Jersey Highlands in a manner that is also consistent with the protection of the area's vital natural features.

In August, the Highlands Council issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for work designed to carry out some of the recommendations included in the "Final BrandPrint Report" that delivered the "you never Knew Jersey" brand for the Highlands region. Designed to foster pride among residents and provide the region's businesses with a way to expand their reach, the Branding and Marketing Plan articulates a unique identity for the region that highlights not only the multitude of assets found in the New Jersey Highlands but also its importance to the rest of the state. It has already garnered a great deal of interest as evidenced by the number of businesses throughout the region who have already submitted their information to be included on the enjoynjhighlands.com website via the "Add to the Adventure" link.

And based on the number of responses to the RFP, we're not the only ones getting excited about this effort. In the coming weeks, we will be conducting interviews with firms that have submitted the best proposals with the goal of making a contract award recommendation to the Highlands Council at our December public meeting.

Land Management in the Highlands. My last subject for this month borrows liberally from the practices used by New York City in managing its watershed lands. In October I presented at the North Jersey Rivers Conference on forestry goals for the Highlands. The prime indicator of water quality, water quantity, and water availability in any water supply area is the amount of forest canopy coverage and forest soil health. This is well-documented by scientific research and empirical evidence. Cities that have protected their drinking water supplies by properly managing the forests that comprise the watersheds that provide that water have not only safeguarded the amount of water available to their citizens, but also its quality and consistent availability. For many of these places, it also has the economic benefits of reducing treatment costs.

Looking at the major cities that have been granted a filtration waiver for their water supplies such as Boston, Seattle, Portland (both Maine and Oregon), San Francisco, and, of course, New York City, there are common factors amongst all of them. They have high source water quality standards, they have comprehensive land management and water protection standards to prevent pollution at the source, aggressive land acquisition programs, impervious coverage limitations, and they all feature healthy forest coverage of 75% or more of their watersheds. New York and Boston both have forest management standards for lands they own, and voluntary standards and financial support for privately held lands within their respective watersheds. The results speak for themselves. Their success should be instructive for our management of the Highlands region.

Currently the Highlands region is 54% forested with that number dropping. Unlike the major cities that have a direct connection with the source of their water, in the Highlands both the distribution network and the consumers are fragmented. 332 different municipalities drink Highlands water. Six major purveyors and about a dozen smaller providers control and distribute water to those consumers. The Highlands Act was created to bring a unified approach to protection of the region and the resources that, in aggregate, provide the bulk of the state's water supply. Our management of the region as a whole must ignore that fragmentation and provide actions that bring the known effective practices used elsewhere to the entirety of the Highlands. That means appropriate standards for land management, financial support for private landowners willing to implement those standards, it means all state agencies respecting and applying those standards, and it means having a commitment to protecting our water supply at its sources.

The long-term nature of this effort can be hard to comprehend, but the future of the state relies on our ability to understand and to implement appropriate actions. Fifty years from now, the state of the resources of the region must be better than today. August 10, 2004 should have marked a low point for these resources, instead we have barely been hanging on. The 54% forest coverage must be higher. There must be standards that both move us towards that higher figure and provide for better overall land management. Finally, we need to make a financial investment in land preservation, stewardship, and restoration to get these results. These are the minimum investments needed to adequately protect our state's future.



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.

- **Byram Township, Sussex County.** Stormwater Management Study, East Brookwood

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.

- **Netcong Borough, Morris County.** Circulation Plan Element

Scopes/Funding Requests

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

- **Mount Arlington Borough, Morris County.** Lake and Watershed Management Plan for Lake Rogerene

Other Notable Implementation Activities

- **Economic Sustainability Plan Update.** At its October meeting, the Highlands Council approved a contract extension with Camoin Associates to provide an update to the Highlands Region Economic Sustainability Plan released in 2022.
- **Kinnelon Borough Certified to Issue Most Common Exemptions.** Two local officials in Kinnelon Borough recently completed training and became certified to issue certain Highlands Act exemptions at the local level through the Municipal Exemption Determination program.
- **Washington Township, Morris County, RMP Update.** An RMP Update to the Land Use Capability Zone map was processed for Block 19, Lot 8, a previously developed site in Washington Township.

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).

- **Preservation Area Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP). Brookwood Musconetcong River Property Owners Association Water Main Replacement.**
  Byram Township, Sussex County
  Project proposes replacement of approximately 2,700 linear feet of water mains, approximately 49 service connections, and associated valves, appurtenances, and fire hydrants to proactively address the existing, aging infrastructure and reduce the potential for water service interruptions associated with water main breaks.
  Highlands Council staff review in progress.
- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #6. Martin Ryerson Middle School Improvements.**
  Ringwood Borough, Passaic County
  The Ringwood School District plans to make improvements to an existing public school parking lot, curbing, sidewalks, and site lighting. The project also involves the rehabilitation of existing stormwater structures. Impervious surface is not expected to increase.
  Highlands Council staff review in progress.
- **Planning Area Exemption Determination,Exemption #4**
  Town of Clinton, Hunterdon County
  Project involves renovations and a change in use to an existing structure that will not result in any impervious surface increase.
  Highlands Council staff finding: Exempt
- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment. Greenwich Township Municipal Building**
  Greenwich Township, Warren County
  A site-specific amendment to the Upper Delaware WQMP is being requested to accommodate an addition to the sewer service area mapping that includes: a new municipal building, three existing single-family homes, and a concession and storage building at the adjacent Thomas Stewart Park.

The project will take place in previously disturbed areas. The projected flow of the development is 3,715 gallons per day and will be conveyed to the Phillipsburg Sewage Treatment Plant.
Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the Highlands Act and RMP

- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment. Astrodyne/Newburgh Road Residential Development**
  Washington Township, Morris County
  A site-specific amendment to the Upper Delaware WQMP is being requested to accommodate the construction of 289 residential units (market rate and affordable) on a 33-acre undeveloped site with previously made improvements to accommodate a planned industrial development. Wastewater will be conveyed to and treated by the Hackettstown SSA. Potable water will be provided by the Hackettstown MUA.
  Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the Highlands Act and RMP
- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment. Sky Farm.**
  Bernards Township, Somerset County
  A site-specific amendment to the Northeast WQMP is being requested for an existing site with small individual systems for cabins with only kitchenette sinks. There are no bathrooms in the cabins. The site is self-serviced by three septic systems for the cabin owners.
  Highlands Council staff review in progress.
- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment. Lamington Farm Club, LLC dba Trump National Golf Club**
  Bedminster Township, Somerset County
  A site-specific amendment to the Upper Raritan WQMP is being requested to accommodate the expansion of an existing club house. The amendment would expand the existing sewer service area by 0.18 acre and increase wastewater flow by approximately 14,369 gallons per day.
  Highlands Council staff review in progress.

GIS Updates

- **REX 2.4 Released.** An update to the Highlands Resource Explorer (REX) interactive map was live in late October. Version enhancements include numerous usability improvements and bug fixes.
- **REX Layer Updates**
  - The Preserved Lands layer was updated to reflect extensive data review that occurred in conjunction with the Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan that will be released shortly. Users are encouraged to submit suggested updates using the Land Preservation Survey Tool.
  - The Land Use Capability Zone layer was updated to reflect recent RMP updates.
- **Highlands Region Interactive Environmental Resource Inventory.** Several bug updates were corrected regarding parcel selection, along with general maintenance of the application.
- **Geospatial Professional Network (GNP) Mid-Atlantic Chapter Conference.** The Highlands Council GIS team attended the GNP Mid-Atlantic conference in Atlantic City, October 21 through 23. GPN Mid-Atlantic is a professional organization that provides educational programs to the Mid-Atlantic GIS community.

Science Initiatives

- **Lake Hopatcong Upper Watershed Streamflow Study.** At its October meeting, the Highlands Council voted to award a contract to the Lake Hopatcong Commission who will partner with the Musconetcong Watershed Association to study the relationship between river depth and flow at the Waterloo Road gauge. This work supports the updated Lake Hopatcong Water Level Management Plan.

Land Preservation Program Updates

- **Highlands Development Credit (HDC) Easement Inspections.** 18 property owners were notified that annual inspections would be taking place between October 19 and December 18 to ensure compliance with the terms of the easements placed on their properties.

Outreach, Education & Events

- **Upcoming: NJLOM Annual Conference.** In November, the Highlands Council will once again have a presence at the New Jersey League of Municipalities Annual Conference in Atlantic City, November 17-19. Highlands Council staff will be available to meet with constituents at booth 122, and Executive Director Ben Spinelli will be among the panelists at the "Highlands 20 Years Later" session scheduled for 9 a.m. Wednesday morning, November 18.
- **Rutgers Center for Real Estate Symposium.** Executive Director Ben Spinelli participated in a panel discussion focused on bridging the divide between development and preservation, at the 3rd Annual Rutgers Center for Real Estate Symposium on October 27 in New Brunswick. The discussion was moderated by former President of Greener by Design Adam Zellner, and included: Dan Kennedy, CEO of the Commercial Real Estate Development Association; Ed Potosnak, NJDEP Commissioner; and Mia Sacks, Princeton Councilwoman.
- **October Tabling.** In October, Highlands Council staff enjoyed meeting and speaking with colleagues and members of the public at the North Jersey Rivers Conference held Friday, October 16, at the Lackland Center at Centenary University in Hackettstown, Warren County, and the Sussex County Harvest, Honey, and Garlic Festival on Saturday, October 17, at the Sussex County Fairgrounds in Augusta, Sussex County. At the Rivers Conference, Executive Director Spinelli also led a session about Forest Management Best Practices alongside Dr. Michael van Clef, Stewardship Director, Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space.







Left: Executive Director Ben Spinelli speaking with a visitor to the Highlands Council table at the North Jersey Rivers Conference. **Center and Right:** Principal Planner Liz Ward and Planning Manager Maryjude Haddock-Weiler help constituents better understand the Highlands region at the Sussex County Harvest Honey and Garlic Festival.

Staffing

- **Communications Team.** In October, the Highlands Council staff welcomed Julia Guzman to the role of part-time communications assistant. Julia's background includes conceptualizing, creating, implementing, and measuring digital campaigns for retail clients, as well as training, volunteer management, marketing/outreach, and client/family support at a regional nonprofit organization serving individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Coordination & Collaboration

- **Department of Agriculture.** Members of the Highlands Council staff met with representatives from the Department of Agriculture and the State Agricultural Development Committee to discuss the forthcoming Forest Easement Program and its applicability in the New Jersey Highlands.
- **NY/NJ Trail Conference.** Highlands Council staff met with members of the Trail Conference regarding a potential preservation project that would facilitate easier access to an existing State Forest.

Legislative Update

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

Highlands Specific Legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
S4624 / A3810	Bucco, Anthony M. Dunn, Aura K.	Provides for reduced sales tax imposition on certain sales in certain Highlands Region Preservation Area municipalities.	10/1/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee
A3217 / S4625	Webber, Jay Bucco, Anthony M.	Requires distribution of State aid to certain municipalities located in whole or in part in the Highlands preservation area.	10/1/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Community and Urban Affairs Committee

Highlands Related Legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
S4658 / A5646	Cryan, Joseph P. Greenstein, Linda R. Macurdy, Andrew	Requires data centers to submit annual report to DEP; requires DEP to establish Data Center Transparency Dashboard.	10/19/2026 Introduced in the Assembly, Referred to Assembly Science, Innovation and Technology Committee 10/1/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
S4659 / A5663	Cryan, Joseph P. Zwicker, Andrew Onyema, Chigozie U.	Requires DEP to conduct study on environmental impacts of data center development in State; prohibits construction of new data centers until study is complete.	10/19/2026 Introduced in the Assembly, Referred to Assembly Science, Innovation and Technology Committee 10/1/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee
A1517 / S4636	Calabrese, Clinton Greenstein, Linda R. Turner, Shirley K.	Establishes NJ Native Seed Commission to develop plan to increase production and use of native seeds in State.	10/22/2026 Passed Senate (Passed Both Houses) (39-0)

Council & Committee Meetings

- **Committee Meetings.** The Budget and Finance Committee met in October.
- **Public Council Meetings.** There is no Highlands Council public meeting scheduled for November. The December public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, December 10 and approved 2027 meeting schedules are available on the September Meeting page of the Highlands Council website 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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