

Highlands Council Monthly Report

September 2023

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Female Goldfinch, Chester Community Garden, Chester Township, Morris County
Photo: Herb August

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Summary of Activities | September 1-30, 2023

Executive Director Priority Spotlight

- **Supporting Highlands Agriculture.** At its October public meeting (10/19) the Highlands Council staff will be making recommendations on several substantial grants designed to promote sustainable agricultural practices in the region. As the largest single land use in the region and a major contributor to the Highlands economy, farming and related agricultural activities are vital to the future of not only the Highlands, but the entire State of New Jersey. Highlands farms are within a 2-hour drive of approximately 20 million people. And while climate change presents a threat to the nation's traditional food producing regions, the Highlands will likely see an extended growing season and a continuation of ample (if erratic) rainfall. Maintaining or expanding agricultural production in the Highlands just makes sense and is also an essential component of the climate resiliency of New Jersey.

These grants help demonstrate the Council's commitment to not only supporting the agricultural industry in the Highlands as it currently exists, but to affirmatively expanding its presence and importance as an essential part of the Highlands region's landscape. Whether it is branding and marketing of the region's agricultural products, raising awareness of the region as an agritourism destination, enabling access to land and training of the next generation of farmers, or any of the other major issues impacting the industry, the Highlands Council will be committing resources to help make certain that agriculture and farming will be a "growing" part of our future.

- **Protecting Highlands Forests.** Throughout September the Highlands Council continued stakeholder engagement related to the development of Highlands Forestry and Wetlands Best Management Practices (BMPs). Highlands forests are an essential component of providing adequate clean drinking water for nearly 7 million residents of New Jersey. This was a key finding of the U.S Forest Service Study that led to the creation of the Highlands Act. Ensuring that forest management and stewardship activities in the region are consistent with the protection of drinking water and with protecting the other important resources provided by Highlands forests as set forth in both the Highlands Act and the Highlands RMP is an essential part of the Highlands Council fulfilling its mission and its responsibility to the entire state. While scientific and planning standards exist in Regional Master Plan (RMP) and several regulatory documents, these standards have not always been followed. The Highlands Forestry and Wetlands BMPs are being developed to provide a practical set of management practices that emphasize maintaining and protecting the region's healthiest forests, restoring forests that were in a degraded condition at the time of the adoption of the Highlands Act and protecting the drinking water supply for 70% of New Jersey's residents.

To date, we have conducted over 60 hours of interviews with more than 50 forest conservation and restoration experts from both the public and private sector, as well as other interested stakeholders. Insights and contributions from these individuals have been exceptionally valuable. Preliminary drafts are being revised based on early feedback and additional interviews are scheduled. At this time, staff anticipates presenting a completed draft for Council consideration to release for public comment before the end of the year. Following public comment, the intent is to incorporate the BMPs into the

RMP through the amendment process. Additional information about this effort will be presented at the October meeting.

- **Amending the Regional Master Plan.** The RMP is due to be updated in 2024. A presentation will be provided at the October Highlands Council meeting outlining the upcoming process to meet this requirement and addressing the current status of the region. Along with re-assessing the accuracy of the plan's Land Use Capability maps and establishing updated municipal buildouts for each of the 88 Highlands municipalities, the update will be incorporating some of the important policy issues that have emerged since the last update. Chief among these issues are the siting guidance for warehouse developments and management and, as noted above, stewardship of Highlands forests. Policy statements for dealing with the impacts of Climate Change, Environmental Justice, and Affordable Housing will also be included. The goal is to adequately and pro-actively deal with threats to the long-term sustainability of the Highlands Region and affirmatively address the important policy areas that will shape the region going forward.

Municipal and County Regional Master Plan (RMP) Implementation

Updates related to Highlands Council-funded projects that help implement the RMP.

- **Hamburg Borough, Sussex County** submitted a scope of work (SOW) requesting funding to support activities related to compliance with the 2023 MS4 permit requirements. Hamburg is located entirely within the planning area of the Highlands Region where conformance with the RMP is voluntary, and although the Borough has not been working toward conformance, the Highlands Council is considering the request due to the critical nature of stormwater management to the entire Highlands Region.
- **High Bridge Borough, Hunterdon County** submitted SOWs for two projects: A Main Street Redevelopment Plan and Stormwater Facilities Mapping (part of 2023 MS4 permit compliance; High Bridge was previously awarded funding from NJDEP and Highlands Council funds will supplement). Highlands Council staff reviewed and approved the SOWs so the projects may begin.
- **Lebanon Borough, Hunterdon County** submitted a revised Stormwater Control Ordinance reflecting recent Stormwater Management rule changes for Highlands Council staff review. Staff has reviewed the ordinance and has found it to be acceptable.
- **Montville Township, Morris County** submitted materials related to a Trails Plan, which is part of the Township's Economic Sustainability Plan. The deliverables were reviewed by staff and found to be consistent with the agreed-upon SOW and approved for payment.
- **Morris County** submitted components of a Lake Management Plan, which were reviewed by staff and found to be consistent with the agreed-upon SOW and approved for payment.
- **West Milford Township, Passaic County** submitted components of a Township-wide Watershed Management Study, which are being reviewed by staff.
- **Hunterdon County** completed work on their Economic Development/Marketing Initiatives Plan. Staff reviewed the plan and found it acceptable.
- **Franklin Township, Warren County** completed a Farmland Preservation Plan that received funding from the SADC and the Highlands Council. Staff reviewed and approved the plan.

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).

- **Woodmont Senior Living.** The Highlands Council received additional materials from the applicant in support of conditions compliance. Highlands Council staff are currently reviewing these materials.
Highlands Council staff review is pending.

GIS Updates

- **Interactive Environmental Resources Inventory (ERI).** The Highlands Council recently implemented several enhancements to the Interactive ERI. New data layers available include Surface Water Springs and HUC 11 watersheds.

Science Initiatives

- **Montclair State University (MSU) Traveling HAB Lab Citizen Science project.** Highlands Council staff members continued water quality monitoring at two waterbodies in the Highlands as part of the [MSU Traveling HAB Lab Citizen Science project](#). Each selected waterbody is monitored every other week. Water samples collected during each event are preserved and provided to MSU for further analysis and quality control purposes.

A total of four sampling events were conducted in the month of September. Visual observations seem to indicate that cyanobacteria cell counts are decreasing. This is expected as cooler weather becomes the norm. Sampling will continue through October, which will mark the end of the project for this year.

The purpose of the MSU Traveling HAB Lab is to increase understanding and awareness of the environmental and health impacts of HABs in New Jersey. The citizen science project engages members of the public in HAB research and monitoring. A [data dashboard summarizing all info collected by the Traveling HAB Lab](#) is available online and will continue to be updated. (At the data dashboard, the sites being monitored by Highlands Council staff are DP1, DP2 and FP1.)



Land Preservation Program Updates

- **Highlands Development Credit (HDC) Updates.** Property owners protecting Highlands resources through the HDC program were notified in September of annual monitoring that will

begin in October. Properties will be visited and inspected for compliance with terms of the HDC deed of easement.

- **Open Space Matching Grant Program (OSP) Updates.** Highlands Council staff have been reaching out to conservation partners in state, county and municipal government as well as the nonprofit community regarding a funding opportunity through the federal Highlands Conservation Act (HCA) grant program. The Highlands Council is the New Jersey lead state agency for the HCA grant, which provides up to a 50% match for land preservation projects in the four-state federal Highlands region. Both competitive and noncompetitive grants are available.

Outreach & Education

- **Upcoming Event: Saturday, October 21, Sussex Harvest Honey and Garlic Festival.** The Highlands Council will once again have a table at [this event](#) that takes place at the Sussex County Fair grounds in Augusta, NJ. The event is free to attend and runs from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- **Upcoming Event: November 14-16, The New Jersey League of Municipalities Annual Conference.** The Highlands Council will be at [booth 126](#), near our NJDEP colleagues at this annual conference in Atlantic City.
- **Northwest New Jersey Rivers Conference.** Executive Director Ben Spinelli facilitated the plenary session at the [Northwest New Jersey Rivers Conference](#), which took place on Saturday, September 30 at the Lackland Center at Centenary University in Hackettstown. The Highlands Council also had a table at the event where visitors could learn more about the work of the Highlands Council.



- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 14 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 Franklin Township, Warren County (grant funding); Sparta Township, Sussex County (Water Use and Conservation Management planning); Town of Clinton, Hunterdon County (prospective development); Vernon Township, Sussex County (Watershed Management/Planning).

Agency & Organization Collaboration

Highlands Council staff often meet with sister state agencies to ensure effective coordination; professional and nongovernmental organizations to learn and collaborate; and other entities that have a stake in protecting the New Jersey Highlands.

- The Highlands Council met recently with representatives from The City of Newark - Watershed for information sharing and discussions of potential collaborations. The City of Newark is the largest landowner in the New Jersey Highlands holding more than 1,500 acres that the city set aside to protect its drinking water.
- Staff members met with representatives from Princeton Hydro to discuss wetland restoration and protection challenges and strategies.

Council Committee Meetings

- The Budget and Finance Committee met on September 12.

Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The October Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, October 19. There will be no Council meeting in November. The December public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, December 14. 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.

