

Highlands Council Update

August 2025

Released September 15, 2025



Female Mallard enjoying a late summer swim on Lake Hopatcong.

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | August 1-31, 2025

From the Executive Director

As summer draws to an end and back-to-school season is upon us, the Highlands Council finds itself with some familiar assignments.

Affordable Housing. We're going to be spending a lot of time working with Highlands municipalities and the Courts on challenges that have been filed to the recently adopted Affordable Housing plans across the region. Conforming Highlands communities have made good faith efforts to plan appropriately, following the guidance provided by the Highlands Council in formulating their housing plans. This is no small task given the challenges of balancing their statutorily mandated affordable housing obligations *and* their statutorily mandated obligations to protect the vital resources of the region. Nevertheless, they now find themselves needing to respond to legal actions brought by interests that do not share that dual responsibility.

The vast majority of Highlands towns are small towns with limited budgets. The economic pressure on these towns created by the costs of litigation often lead to settlements that are not consistent with the goals of the Highlands Act or the Highlands Regional Master Plan. This was evident during Round 3, where many marginal properties or properties that were wholly unsuited for intense development were included in settlements of challenges – without the guidance and input of the Highlands Council. This is the exact type of outcome that the Highlands Council seeks to avoid for Round 4 and that the Highlands Act was intended to prevent.

One concept that must be understood is that large scale inappropriately located and improperly scaled developments within the region compromise the Highlands's ability to serve its important role in the future of the state. The region currently exports around 840 million gallons of water each day. Poorly planned development increases the internal consumption of water within the region. It also impacts resources such as forested land and prime groundwater recharge areas, which reduces the quantity and quality of available water. Meanwhile, external demand for Highlands water continues to grow. The Highlands Act was created specifically to provide a balance that would ensure the region could meet the state's water supply needs indefinitely into the future. Losing site of this balance in the quest to create affordable housing units (and in reality, the market-rate units that comprise the bulk of homes in inclusionary developments) at a rate that is too high to maintain resource protection goals is a story that will not end well. For these reasons, the Highlands Council cannot be absent from the resolution of these Round 4 challenges.

Climate. The Council will likely be awarding a contract in the near future to complete the first phase of a new Regional Master Plan element to address the challenges that Climate Change presents for our mission. Changing precipitation patterns, increased extreme precipitation events, agricultural impacts, damage from tropical storms well inland similar to what occurred last fall in North Carolina, and ecological changes to the natural systems of the region are all situations we will increasingly be facing and for which we need plans. The Highlands region is an important component of the state's overall climate resilience strategy.

Ensuring a reliable adequate supply of clean drinking water regardless of rainfall trends, preserving food production in proximity to population centers, retention of flood waters, temperature mitigation and responding to changes in ecosystems brought about by changing temperature trends must be addressed. This is a priority for the Council.

Regional Plan Monitoring Report. Staff continue to work on updating the 2018 Monitoring Program Recommendation Report (MPRR), which is an important project to assess the successes and shortcomings of the Council's work since the inception of the Highlands Act. One of the outcomes will likely be recommendations regarding our continued quest for open space funding, the need for additional staff, the necessity of investing in ecological restoration and reforestation across the region, and ways of addressing emerging threats to the region's resources such as the proliferation of data centers and solar farms. This project will likely be completed early in 2026 with specific actions to address the MPRR's findings following shortly thereafter.

Moving Forward. Finally, we will continue to highlight the actions the next administration must take to adequately support the goals of the Highlands Act and the Highlands RMP. Once again, I will repeat (and I will continue to repeat until these issues are addressed) that there are few more fundamental responsibilities of government than protecting and ensuring an adequate supply of clean drinking water for the citizens it serves. The state has failed to adequately support the Highlands Council throughout its now 21-year history. This must change. This month, I will speak to the staffing levels.

The professional staff at the Highlands are talented and dedicated to protecting the region's resources. Our Planning, Science, and GIS professionals work hard every day to carry out our mission. However, the Highlands Council operates with about one half the staff afforded to our sister agency, the Pinelands Commission. For a relatively small investment (around \$500,000/year) the Highlands Council could close some of the functional gaps and address some essential policy areas that currently are either not addressed or are inadequately addressed. There is no climate scientist on staff. There is no agricultural specialist to help manage a region where farming is the most prevalent land use after residential housing. The Council needs a land management specialist to oversee both land preservation efforts and ecological restoration projects-particularly when it comes to forest management issues. Finally, a water resource engineer, a position the Council formerly had filled, needs to be engaged to assist with project review, stormwater management, and matters involving the region's most important resource, drinking water supplies.

I will point out once more the sharp contrast between the investment that New York City has made in protecting its watershed and water supply (and the benefits that investment has yielded) with the wholly inadequate investment New Jersey has made in the work of the Highlands Council to protect the watersheds and water supply lands within the Highlands region. The next governor must demonstrate the necessary leadership and commitment to protection of the state's water supply by investing in the Highlands and its necessary functions. Failing to take these measures will result in future generations of New Jersey residents paying the price for our shortcomings.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ben", with a stylized flourish at the end.

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.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Bethlehem Township, Hunterdon County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Byram Township, Sussex County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Califon Borough, Hunterdon County.** Build-Out Analysis
- **Chester Township, Morris County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Jefferson Township, Morris County.** Trout Habitat Quality Study, Phase III
- **Lebanon Borough, Hunterdon County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Washington Borough, Warren County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Washington Township, Warren County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Washington Township, Morris County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan

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.

- **Bernardsville Borough, Somerset County.** Highlands Center Feasibility Study
- **Byram Township, Sussex County.** Stormwater Management Study, East Brookwood
- **Hopatcong Borough, Sussex County.** Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI) and OpenSpace and Recreation Plan
- **Hunterdon County.** Stormwater Management Plan, Mapping; Bicycle Facilities Plan, Administration
- **Jefferson Township, Morris County.** Habitat Conservation Plan: Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Survey
- **Mountain Lakes Borough, Morris County.** Lakes and Watersheds Management Plan
- **Mount Olive Township, Morris County.** Mine Brook Dams Removal Plan (Stream Management Plan)
- **Netcong Borough, Morris County.** Sewer Infiltration and Inflow Study
- **Washington Township, Warren County.** Environmental Resource Inventory

Scopes/Funding Requests

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

- **High Bridge Borough, Hunterdon County.** Stormwater Management, MS4 Permit compliance, Watershed Improvement Plan (WIP) Phase 1 Report.

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 Consistency Review, General Permit #1 Authorization (w/NJDEP).
Rockaway Creek Restoration Project**

Tewksbury Township, Hunterdon County

Proposed project to restore less than 200 linear feet of the Rockaway Creek including stabilizing the left and right banks in Tewksbury Township. Channel restoration to increase the carrying capacity of the stream.

Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the Highlands Regional Master Plan

- **Planning Area Exemption Review, [Exemption #9](#)
Stormwater Basin Rehabilitation and Improvement**

Pequannock Township, Morris County and Bernards Township, Somerset County

NJDOT requested a review of materials related to a state-wide stormwater basin improvement project that includes three basins in the New Jersey Highlands. The project will help ensure compliance with USEPA and NJDEP stormwater regulations as well as ensuring a more resilient stormwater infrastructure system.

Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the goals and purposes of the Highlands Act and qualifies for Exemption #9.

- **Planning Area Exemption Review, [Exemption #4](#)
Municipal Public Library, Patio Expansion**

Chester Township, Morris County

Chester Township seeks to expand an existing patio by 1,091 sq. ft. The proposed project does not increase the lawfully existing impervious surface by more than ¼ acre and thus qualifies for the exemption.

Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the goals and purposes of the Highlands Act and qualifies for Exemption #4.

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

Harding Township, Morris County

An application for a site-specific amendment to the Northeast Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) was submitted to NJDEP to accommodate a multifamily residential development on a previously developed 3.2-acre parcel. The proposed project is estimated to generate 6.625 gallons of wastewater per day, which will be treated on-site. Potable water will be provided by NJ American Water via existing wells both inside and outside the Highlands region. The proposed development does not impact the integrity of other resources on the site.

Highlands Council staff finding: consistent with the Highlands Act and RMP

GIS Updates

- A **Natural Hazards section** was added to the [Highlands Resource Explorer \(REX\)](#).
- The **Highlands County Conformance Status layer**, viewable on REX, was updated to reflect the parameters of county conformance as discussed in the Highlands Council's adopted Plan Conformance Procedures.

Outreach & Education

- **Emails from the Highlands Council.** The Highlands Council is in the process of transitioning our opt-in email service to a new platform. If you wish to start or continue receiving emails from the New Jersey Highlands Council, please complete the [Email Updates form](#) on the Highlands Council website to set your preferences. Individuals previously subscribed to Highlands Council email alerts are encouraged to complete this form before December 31, 2025 to continue receiving emails from the Highlands Council.
- **Upcoming events.** The Highlands Council will have an information table at the [North Jersey Rivers Conference](#), scheduled for Friday, October 17 at the David and Carol Lackland Center at Centenary University in Hackettstown, and the [Sussex County Harvest, Honey, and Garlic Festival](#), scheduled for Saturday, October 18 at the Sussex County Fair Grounds.
- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 28 inquiries from constituents in August.



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 August, Highlands Council staff met with **Clinton Township, Hunterdon County** (Water Use and Conservation Management Planning) and **Kinnelon Borough, Morris County** (housing).

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 August, Highlands Council staff met with the **Trust for Public Land** (Highlands Open Space and Recreation Plan).

Legislative Update

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

Bill Number	Primary Sponsors	Bill Summary	Bill Status
S4567 / A5860 Aca (1R)	Greenstein, Linda R. Singleton, Troy Morales, Carmen Theresa Singh, Balvir Swain, Lisa Morales, Carmen Theresa Singh, Balvir Swain, Lisa	Appropriates \$107,999,000 from constitutionally dedicated CBT revenues and various Green Acres funds to DEP for local government open space acquisition, park development, and planning projects, and for certain administrative expenses.	8/4/2025: Approved P.L.2025, c.119.

Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The September Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, September 18. The October public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, October 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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