

Highlands Council Update

April 2026

Released May 13, 2026



Spicebush. Chester Township, Morris County
photo by Sarah Friend, Highlands Council Environmental Scientist.

Contents

| | |
|--|---|
| From the Executive Director | 1 |
| Municipal and County Regional Master Plan (RMP) Implementation | 3 |
| Project Reviews | 4 |
| GIS Updates | 5 |
| Science Initiatives | 5 |
| Land Preservation Program Updates | 5 |
| Staffing and Staff Development | 6 |
| Outreach, Education & Events | 6 |
| Council & Committee Meetings | 7 |



(908) 879-6737 | www.nj.gov/njhighlands



Follow the New Jersey Highlands Council @njhighlandscouncil

Highlands Council Monthly Report

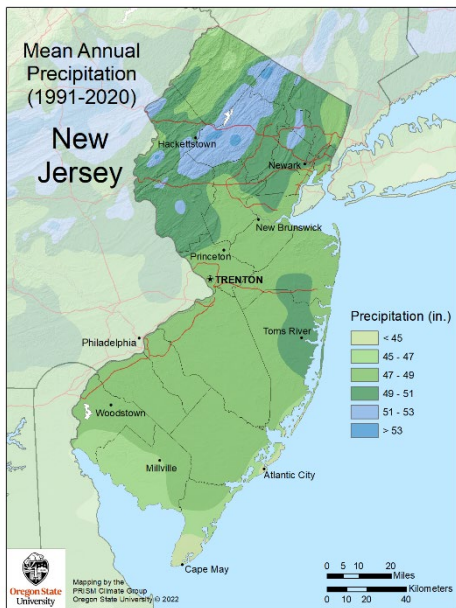
Summary of Activities | April 1-30, 2026

From the Executive Director

Why the Highlands? When did the Highlands region first become officially recognized for its importance to the state's drinking water? Only about 120 years ago. While the City of Newark had been purchasing watershed lands in the area since the 1890s, it wasn't until 1907 that a report from New Jersey's Potable Water Commission spelled it out quite clearly:

"The Highlands' watersheds are the best in the State in respect to ease of collection, in scantiness of population, with consequent absence of contamination; in elevation, giving opportunity for gravity delivery, and in softness as shown by chemical analysis. These watersheds should be preserved from pollution at all hazards, for upon them the most populous portions of the State must depend for water-supplies. There has been too much laxness in the past regarding this important matter."

While this excerpt highlights the central reasons why the Highlands became a primary source of water for the state's large population centers in the northeast, there are several additional factors that explain why the Highlands region was and remains essential to the well-being of the entire state of New Jersey.



Copyright ©2022, PRISM Group, Oregon State University, prism.oregonstate.edu, map created 2022.

One is rainfall. On average, the Highlands receives more annual rainfall than the rest of the state. The map to the left illustrates that expected rainfall in much of the region is 50 or more inches each year, with portions of the Highlands exceeding 53 inches, the highest totals in the state. But it isn't just the plentiful rainfall that makes the Highlands the state's most important source of drinking water.

Another factor is forests. Approximately 54% of the Highlands remains forested and since forests serve as natural filters, these lands provide vital protection of the state's water supply. The steep forested ridges of the Highlands are the headwaters for New Jersey's major rivers like the Passaic, the Raritan and the Musconetcong, and the largest surface reservoirs in the state are found here. Forests also provide protection against flooding and the associated damage.

And finally, the Highlands continues to be a largely rural area by New Jersey standards, supporting a great deal of open space and a substantial agricultural presence.

It's somewhat staggering to think about the fact that New Jersey has been talking about protecting the Highlands region for so long. And while things like geology, terrain, and forest cover may seem like happy accidents that allow us to have clean, plentiful water for free, maintaining the integrity of these resources

for the benefit of the entire state is anything but. This is why the Highlands Act was created – to ensure that structural and financial systems were in place to achieve the protection that has long been envisioned. We are not there yet.

Highlands Conformance. Successful implementation of the Highlands Act relies on the good planning decisions and actions of municipalities and counties throughout the region. In a process known as “Plan Conformance” the Highlands Council provides funding and technical support that enables local governments to align planning and regulatory documents with the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP) and the Highlands Act.

Plan Conformance is a required action for municipalities and counties with land in the defined Highlands Preservation Area. It is voluntary for towns located wholly within the Highlands Planning Area or for the Planning Area portion of towns that are split between the Preservation and Planning Areas.

To be considered a conforming municipality, a town must adopt a Highlands element to their local land use Master Plan and a prescribed Highlands Land Use Ordinance (LUO). Contrary to a common misconception, voluntary conformance – often referred to as “opting in” to the RMP – does not mean that the Planning Area lands are now part of the Preservation Area. For Planning Area-only municipalities and for the Planning Area portion of split towns, the provisions of the Highlands LUO are somewhat less restrictive than those that apply for the Preservation Area. The costs to do all this are covered entirely by grants from the Highlands Council. In addition, conforming municipalities have access to grant funding that supports much of the planning work towns are already doing or wish they could get to if funds were available. Technical assistance and enhanced legal protections for land use actions are additional benefits.

As noted above, protection of the Highlands region equals protection of the entire state of New Jersey. This is why having as many of the 88 Highlands towns as possible working toward Plan Conformance is so important. This is particularly true in the Planning Area, where the strictest protections of the Highlands Act do not automatically apply. While the majority of sensitive environmental features are found in the Preservation Area, the Planning Area contains significant resources as well. Bringing those Planning Area lands into conformance is important.

The past two years have seen a significant increase in the number of both split and Planning Area-only municipalities choosing to fully conform to the Highlands RMP. These towns have made a conscious decision to undertake this work because they recognize both the responsibility to protect New Jersey’s water and the benefits that come with Plan Conformance. You can check on the conformance status of any Highlands municipality on the [Highlands Council website](#).

Any town considering conformance is eligible for an Initial Assessment Grant to fully evaluate the impacts of conformance. I urge every non-conforming municipality to take advantage of this grant so an informed decision regarding conformance can be made. If you are a municipal leader and your town hasn’t already done so, contact your Highlands liaison (listed on the same web page as conformance status) and we will walk you through the process step-by-step. There is no obligation incurred by taking this measure and the only cost is the time taken to learn the truth about what conformance means for your community.

Drought Continues. Yes, I need to point this out again. While recent rainfall has eased some of the concerns regarding the drought conditions that have been impacting the Highlands, the fact remains that over the past two years, the region has experienced a significant deficit in precipitation. One or two months of normal rainfall has not, and will not, remedy the effects on drinking water supplies, agricultural interests and ecological health of the Highlands. Additionally, there will be an elevated threat of wildfires. This current stretch of abnormally lower precipitation dates back to the beginning of 2024 – a nearly 30-month period of deficit interrupted by only four months with normal or above-normal levels of rainfall during that period.

Soil moisture levels are alarmingly low. Stream flows are similarly well below normal, which is also an indicator of low groundwater levels. Reservoirs in the region continue to be well below their normal levels for this time of year. New Jersey is currently in a [drought warning](#), and it is widely recognized that [the state is in a long-term drought](#). Long-term drought creates profound, compounding, and often irreversible impacts. These dry periods, exacerbated by climate change, lead to significant declines in groundwater recharge and surface water levels that may take years to recover even after normal precipitation returns.

And while public focus shifts quickly to conservation measures once we're already IN a drought (appropriately so), consider what could happen if we focused on the supply before we needed to worry about demand. The resources of the Highlands protect water quantity, quality, and timing. The last issue – timing – concerns the consistent availability of adequate water supplies. Healthy, substantial forest cover and protection of wetlands are the best insurance policies we can have to ensure a sufficient supply of drinking water during periods of drought.

This point brings me back to where I started this month: Protection of the Highlands IS protection of New Jersey, and we're still not there yet.



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.

- **Mountain Lakes, Morris County.** Environmental Resource Inventory.
- **Morris Township, Morris County.** Conformance Assessment.
- **Union Township, Hunterdon County.** Conformance Ordinance.

Deliverables Received

The following municipalities have submitted project deliverables that are currently being reviewed by Highlands Council staff for consistency with the RMP.

- **Clinton Township, Hunterdon County.** Water Use and Conservation Management 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.

- **Green Township, Sussex County.** Drainage Study
- **Hampton Borough, Hunterdon County.** Highlands Master Plan Element, Reexamination Report, and adoption of a Highlands Conformance Ordinance
- **Hope Township, Warren County.** Conformance Assessment
- **Mendham Township, Morris County.** Farmland Preservation Plan
- **Pohatcong Township, Warren County.** Open Space and Recreation Plan
- **Randolph Township, Morris County.** Sustainable Economic Development: Farm to Table Initiative
- **Washington Township, Warren County.** Highlands Center Planning Study

Other Notable Implementation Activities

- **Alpha Borough in Warren County and Union Township in Hunterdon County achieve full conformance status.** Highlands Council staff have reviewed materials received from both Alpha and Union and found them to be consistent with the Highlands RMP, deeming the municipalities to be fully conforming with the Highlands RMP.
- **Sustainable Agriculture Grant Renewals.** [City Green, Inc.](#), [NOFA NJ](#), and [Foodshed Alliance](#) all received scope of work (SOW) approvals in April to continue projects that expand innovative farming practices in the Highlands region. Reimbursement is contingent on completion of all work described in the SOWs within the proposed schedules.
- **Sustainable Agriculture Grant Completion.** North Jersey Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) operates the River-Friendly Farm (RFF) Certification program, which promotes sustainable and regenerative farming practices. North Jersey RC&D leveraged Highlands Council grant funding to certify or re-certify six farms in the Highlands region. *(This work was completed in 2025 but was omitted from prior Highlands Council Updates due to a delay in receipt of final documents and reporting materials from the grant recipient.)*

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.
Highlands Council staff review is pending.

- **Planning Area Consistency Review – Prime Storage Phillipsburg**

Lopatcong Township, Warren County

Applicant is proposing construction of a 17,043 square-foot, one-story storage building with parking and driveway on a previously developed site.

Highlands Council staff review is pending.

GIS Updates

- **Accessibility Updates.** In the context of new rules regarding web content accessibility on government websites, the Highlands Council GIS team has been working to make our online applications more accessible. Enhancements to the [Highlands ERI](#) application were completed in April with enhancements to the [Highlands Resource Explorer \(REX\)](#) scheduled to go live in May.

Science Initiatives

- **Highlands Water Quality Monitoring Program Update.** Highlands Council Science staff members completed a two-day training and accreditation program to ensure data collected in the Highlands Water Quality Monitoring Program will be accepted by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) for use in the [Integrated Report of Impaired Waterbodies](#). The training and testing took place April 8 and 9 and was jointly facilitated by the NJDEP and [The Watershed Institute](#).

Training sites included India Brook in India Brook Park in Mendham Township and Primrose Brook in the Jockey Hollow section of Morristown National Historical Park. Macroinvertebrate ID testing was conducted at the offices of the Great Swamp Watershed Association in Morristown. Accreditation is valid for three years.

Staff have identified 25 stations across the Highlands region that are not frequently being monitored by other entities that will now be included in annual statewide data as a result of the new Highlands Council program. Property owners are currently being contacted, and monitoring will continue from May through August.



L to R: Highlands Council science staff, Casey Ezske, Carolyn Klaube, Kelley Curran, Sarah Friend.

Land Preservation Program Updates

- **Highlands Development Credit (HDC) Updates.** Highlands Council sent notification to 52 property owners regarding annual site inspections for compliance with terms of their conservation easements. Inspections will be conducted between April 15 and June 15.

Staffing and Staff Development

- **OPEN POSITION DEADLINE EXTENDED: Information Technology (IT) Coordinator, part-time/hourly.** The deadline for applications for this open position has been extended to Friday, May 22. [Complete job description and application instructions are available online](#) (pdf).
- **Resource Management Specialist/Forester.** A total of 32 applications were received to fill this open position. Staff are in the process of reviewing applications and identifying candidates to interview.

Outreach, Education & Events

- **Upcoming: 2026 New Jersey Planning and Redevelopment Conference – June 10, 11, 12.** Executive Director Ben Spinelli will be a featured speaker at two sessions during this annual conference, hosted by New Jersey Future and the New Jersey Chapter of the American Planning Association. Spinelli is among three panelists that will be discussing the conversion of warehouses to detentions facilities during the virtual portion of the conference on Thursday, June 10. On Friday, June 12, during the in-person portion of the conference, he will be one of five panelists discussing the new New Jersey State Plan. Additional information is available at the [conference website](#).
- **Highlands Council 2025 Annual Report Released.** At its April public meeting, the Highlands Council voted to release the Highlands Council 2025 Annual Report. The report is available on the Highlands Council website and has copies available in the office and can be mailed upon request.
- **Raritan Headwaters Association (RHA) Watershed Tools for Local Leaders.** Highlands Council Executive Director Ben Spinelli spoke at a recent lunchtime webinar hosted by RHA. Approximately 35 individuals attended with an engaging Q&A period following the formal presentation. A [recording of the session](#) is available on the RHA YouTube channel.
- **Bring Your Child to Work Day.** Once again Highlands Council staff welcomed an energetic group of youngsters to our office to learn about many aspects of water protection. Participants in this year’s event learned about watersheds, stormwater and water quality through indoor experiments; explored the power of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) during “Mappy Hour;” experienced real-world GIS data collection through natural landscape education, and conducted stream health assessments. Students even got to learn about the public process of good government in a mock Highlands Council Meeting.



Left. Considering moisture level, texture, and color helps determine if this ‘dirt’ should be classified as wetland soils. Our GIS team explained the importance of proper data collection techniques in the field. **Center.** After discussing the critical role of pollinators to our environment, our guests were invited to express themselves artistically creating butterflies and other pollinators. **Right.** Who doesn’t love getting up close and personal with stream critters?! Understanding which critters indicate healthy water is an important part of monitoring water quality.

Council & Committee Meetings

- **Committee Meetings.** The RMP Amendment Committee and the Plan Conformance Committee met in April.
- **Public Council Meetings.** The May Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, May 21. The June public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, June 18. 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.



(908) 879-6737 | www.nj.gov/njhighlands



Follow the New Jersey Highlands Council @njhighlandscouncil