

Highlands Council Update

July 2026

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Denville Township, Morris County
(preservation project in progress)

photo by Elise Cavicchi, Land Protection Coordinator, New Jersey Conservation Foundation

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | July 1-31, 2026

From the Executive Director

Climate Challenge. After repeatedly sounding the alarm about the long-term drought the Highlands has been experiencing over the past two-plus years, July 2026 brought ample rainfall. That is certainly good news for the region, for Highlands farmers, and for the state's water supply. July typically brings the warmest temperatures and highest rainfall with normal monthly totals between 4.5 and 5 inches. Because most of this rainfall occurs in hit-and-miss summer thunderstorms, there can be a great deal of variability across the region, but July 2026 brought widespread above-normal totals to the Highlands. Here at the Highlands offices in Chester, we saw over eight inches of rainfall in July. Totals across the region ranged to over 10 inches in some locations as some sites saw torrential rains with over four inches falling in a single event.

What does this mean? Well, for starters we need to realize that there has been a rainfall deficit of over 20 inches during the 27 preceding months. One month of ample precipitation is great, but it doesn't negate that shortfall. While the recent rain has been extremely beneficial — most Highlands reservoirs are now at capacity, stream flows have increased in the short term, and groundwater levels have begun to recover — it will take several months of normal and above-normal rains to alleviate the impact of the extended dry spell we have experienced. The wild swings between months-long drought conditions and torrential rain events reveal the real challenge that climate change brings to the mission of the Highlands Council: drought or deluge, the region has a daily responsibility to export massive quantities of clean drinking water to the rest of the state. This highlights the importance of protecting and enhancing the region's vital resources.

The extremes that we have experienced recently (and that are likely to become increasingly common) demonstrate the spectrum of conditions that we need to anticipate and respond to. Highlands forests and wetlands play an important part in retaining floodwaters from extreme rainfall as well as ensuring that there will be a consistent flow of clean water during droughts. Maintaining and expanding region-wide forest coverage and limiting new impervious cover are two ways that we can make the region more climate resilient and guarantee that New Jersey can continue to count on the Highlands to deliver an adequate supply of clean drinking water to its residents and businesses.

Whether it's an increased effort to preserve land, programs to steward and restore natural systems, or measures that will anticipate the next source of development pressure, our work needs to get ahead of the factors that can compromise all of the benefits the region provides. The need to protect those resources in the face of a changing climate is a challenge that we must successfully navigate to safeguard the state's future.

How does 17 equal 70? That's not really a math problem. It refers to the fact that while the Highlands region comprises about 17% of the New Jersey's total land mass, it provides some or all of the drinking water for 70% of the state's population. In particular, it's the place where New Jersey's densely populated

urban corridor gets its water. Water from the Highlands is derived from three main sources: surface reservoirs, riverine intakes, and groundwater wells. Every day, over 860 million gallons of water are exported out of the region to other parts of the state. There are 332 of the state's 564 municipalities on the receiving end of that pipeline. Investing in the protection of that water supply and the natural systems that both provide and safeguard its quality and quantity is not an option, it is an essential obligation to protect and enhance the state's future. You only need to look at the current debates taking place in the western United States to understand the issues that water insecurity creates.

We are fortunate to live in a place where adequate annual rainfall is normal. We also benefit from decisions that were made to secure our water supply by prior generations. However, these advantages that we enjoy have also made us complacent. For the most part, clean water coming out of our taps has never really been an issue in New Jersey. It may not always be that way. While the Highlands Act was put in place to help ensure that an adequate supply of water would always be available, the measures it contained did not end the need to continue working on the protection of our most precious resource. The region remains vulnerable to the impacts of inappropriate development; complexities continue to arise from having 850,000 people living among its resources; and the constantly evolving pressures for additional development present new challenges every day. This is primarily in the Planning Area portion of the region and most acute in non-conforming portions of the Planning Area.

The Highlands Act was created for good reason. Among the many responsibilities of government, none is more fundamental than safeguarding an adequate supply of clean drinking water for the people it serves. If we wish to adequately fulfill that responsibility, we need to invest in the region by providing funds for land preservation, resource management and stewardship, ecological restoration, and offsetting the very real economic pressures that come along with the restrictions that have been put in place, and the obligations that have been passed on to Highlands municipalities that host and protect water resources-primarily for the benefit of people who live somewhere else. For these reasons, we must treat the Highlands differently than the rest of the state to protect the future for everyone in New Jersey. If we cannot come to terms with the necessity of doing things in 17% of the state for protection of 70% of its residents, providing for the sustainable future of New Jersey will become all-the-more difficult.



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.

- **Bernardsville Borough, Somerset County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan.
- **Hackettstown, Warren County.** Stormwater Management Planning/MS4 Permitting Compliance.

- **Holland Township, Hunterdon County.** Stormwater Management Planning/MS4 Stormwater Compliance, Phase 1.
- **Lopatcong Township, Warren County.** Stormwater Management Planning/MS4 Permitting Compliance.
- **Mendham Borough, Morris County.**
 - Plan Conformance Assessment Report.
 - Highlands Master Plan Element and Reexamination Report.
- **Montville Township, Morris County.** (Partial Completion) Floodplain Reconnection/ Groundwater Recharge Demonstration Project.
- **Hunterdon County.** Musconetcong Watershed Association Management Plan, Year 1.

Deliverables Received

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

- **Hunterdon County.** Bicycle 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.

- **Allamuchy Township, Warren County.** Highlands Master Plan Element and Master Plan Reexamination Report.
- **Bernardsville Borough, Somerset County.** Highlands Center Plan.
- **Chester Township, Morris County.** Highlands Council Plan Conformance Ordinance Preparation and Adoption.
- **Franklin Township, Warren County.** Plan Conformance Assessment.
- **Harmony Township, Warren County.** Plan Conformance Assessment.
- **Mount Olive Township, Morris County.** Plan Conformance Assessment.

Scopes/Funding Requests

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

- **Netcong Borough, Morris County.** Circulation and Transportation Plan Update.
- **Glen Gardner, Hunterdon County.** Master Plan Reexamination Report.

Other Notable Implementation Activities

- **Town of Boonton Plan Conformance Petition and Center Designation Approval.** At its June public meeting, the Highlands Council approved a request from the Town of Boonton in Morris County for support in aligning the town's planning and regulatory documents with the Highlands RMP. The Council also approved the town's request to designate the entire town as a Highlands Center. Highlands Center designation allows for an enhanced level of planning focused on appropriate development and redevelopment that will be guided by a Highlands Center Plan. This approval became official in July following expiration of the Governor's review period of the Highlands Council meeting 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). Boonton Avenue Plant PFAS Treatment**

Kinnelon Borough, Morris County

The Fayson Lake Water Company plans to integrate permanent ion exchange processes for PFAS treatment into existing groundwater well systems at its Boonton Ave Treatment Plant. The wells currently supply drinking water to approximately 899 service connections in Morris County.

Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent with Goals and Purposes of Highlands Act.

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP). Greenwood Lake Underground Distribution Line**

West Milford, Passaic County

Project proposes the installation of approximately 6,920 linear feet of underground electric distribution line and associated accessories (e.g. manholes and pull boxes) along paved roadway/road shoulder.

Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent with Goals and Purposes of Highlands Act.

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP). JCP&L Furnace Brook Distribution Improvement Project**

Liberty Township, Warren County

JCP&L has identified the Furnace Brook Distribution Circuit as one of 18 high-priority circuits in New Jersey, based on historical circuit reliability data. Improvements will include upgrades and replacement of existing equipment along the circuit which extends approximately 900 feet along US Highway 46 in Liberty Township.

Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent with Goals and Purposes of Highlands Act.

- **NJDEP Comment Request on General Permit #1: South Branch Raritan River Restoration Project**

Washington Township, Morris County

The Raritan Trout Club has proposed a stream restoration project along 1,850 feet of the South Branch of the Raritan River. Activities include the construction of eight cross vanes, boulder deflectors, spawning riffle enhancements, and streambank stabilization.

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

- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment. Oxbow Farm Club**

Bedminster Township, Somerset County

A site-specific amendment to the Upper Raritan WQMP is required to accommodate the construction of a 17-bedroom addition to an existing 9-bedroom facility and a separate event space/venue.

Highlands Council Staff finding: Consistent with the Highlands Act and Regional Master Plan with Modifications.

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

Lopatcong Township, Warren County

A site-specific amendment to the Upper Delaware WQMP is required to accommodate the development of 367,350 square foot warehouse with a total impervious surface of 15.38 acres, within a designated Highlands Redevelopment Area. Required water supply does not represent a consumptive or depletive water use relative to the source watershed.

Highlands Council Staff finding: Consistent with the Highlands Act and Regional Master Plan with Conditions.

- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Review. Glenlora Housing Development**

Chester Township, Morris County

A site-specific amendment to the Upper Raritan WQMP Area is needed for a change in use at the site. Project involves the redevelopment of a property to construct 24 affordable housing units with associated parking, access roads/driveways, stormwater management facilities, utilities, grading, landscaping, and related site improvements. No increase in wastewater flow beyond what is currently permitted is projected by the applicant, however the redevelopment will be served by a new on-site wastewater treatment and disposal system.

Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the Highlands Act and Regional Master Plan.

GIS Updates

- **Highlands Resource Explorer (REX).** REX updates in July included bug fixes and usability enhancements. For latest information regarding changes to REX, visit the in-app [Help section](#).
- **Data Layers updated:**
 - Highlands Designated Centers – updated to reflect current designations.
 - Net Water Availability by Subwatershed (partial update) – updated to include new availability numbers for HUC-14s that intersect with Harding Township.

Staffing and Staff Development

- **Deadline Extended: OpenPosition: Part-Time Communications Assistant/Social Media Manager.** The Highlands Council is currently seeking a part-time team member to assist with the agency's communications efforts including social media. The deadline for applications has been extended through Friday, August 28. Please see the job posting for complete details and application instructions.
- **ESRI User Conference:** The GIS department virtually attended the annual ESRI User Conference, which provides the latest information regarding the mapping platform that is the foundation for much of the Council's work. Highlights from this year included enhanced integration with Microsoft products, AI developments, information on the upcoming national datum change, and Best Practices for creating online applications.

Outreach, Education & Events

- **Newark Watershed Science & Leadership Academy (NWSLA) Summer Program.** Highlands Council Executive Director Ben Spinelli was invited to participate as a panelist and guest educator during this STEM course focused on educating high school students about the Pequannock Watershed, which is located entirely in the New Jersey Highlands region and is the main source of drinking water for the City of Newark. The panel discussion on July 7 included

representatives from the city's water department and regional water purveyors discussing regulatory compliance. On July 17, Ben provided students with an overview of Source Water Protection in the Pequannock Watershed.

- **Constituent Call summary.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 9 constituent inquiries in June.

Coordination & Collaboration

- **Highlands/NJDEP Coordination Meeting.** Highlands Council technical staff met with representatives from the NJDEP Freshwater Wetlands Permitting, Land Use Enforcement, Water Quality Management Planning, and the Department of Agriculture to discuss specific projects, as well as broader policy and practice issues to help ensure effective coordination in the Highlands region.

Legislative Update

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

Highlands Related Legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
A5327/S2027	Pintor Marin, Eliana Park, Ellen J. Sarlo, Paul A. Greenstein, Linda R.	Appropriates \$60,743,569,000 in State funds and \$30,495,124,195 in federal funds for the State budget for fiscal year 2027.	6/30/2026 Approved With Line Item Veto P.L.2026, c.27. 6/30/2026 Passed Senate (Passed Both Houses) (26-14)
S4424/A5333	Smith, Bob Greenstein, Linda R. Angelozi, Anthony Rowan, Maureen McCoy, Tennille R.	Appropriates \$15,546,575 to DEP from constitutionally dedicated CBT revenues for grants to certain nonprofit entities to acquire or develop lands for recreation and conservation purposes, and for certain administrative expenses.	7/30/2026 Approved P.L.2026, c.61. 6/30/2026 Passed Assembly (Passed Both Houses) (79-0-0)
S4423/A5334	McKeon, John F. Tiver, Latham Sweeney, Marisa Morales, Carmen Theresa Reynolds-Jackson, Verlina	Appropriates \$77,406,208 from constitutionally dedicated CBT revenues and various Green Acres funds to DEP for local government open space acquisition and park development projects, and for certain administrative expenses.	7/30/2026 Approved P.L.2026, c.60. 6/30/2026 Passed Assembly (Passed Both Houses) (78-0-0)

Council & Committee Meetings

- **Committee Meetings.** The RMP Amendment Committee met in July.
- **Public Council Meetings.** The August Highlands Council public meeting has been cancelled. The September public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, September 17. 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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