

Highlands Council Update

June 2026

Released July 13, 2026



West Brook. West Milford Passaic County
photo by Carolyn Klaube, Senior Natural Resource Specialist.

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | June 1-30, 2026

From the Executive Director

Forest Health in the Highlands. The resource that plays the biggest role in protecting Highlands water is forest cover. Healthy forests capture and retain rainwater and snow melt. Healthy forest soils and leaf litter provide filtration and allow for the gradual release of water into rivers and streams while also enabling recharge of ground water. Water quality, water quantity, and water timing are all impacted by the presence, or a lack, of extensive healthy forest. The healthiest and most valuable forests in the Highlands are the region's "core forest," which is defined as contiguous, unfragmented woodland that lies more than 300 feet away from any altered edge, such as roads or development.

Currently, about 40% of the 1,340-square-mile Highlands region is core forest. While the Highlands Act, its accompanying regulations, and permanent preservation protect most of the region's remaining core forest, threats that are beyond the reach of laws, regulations, and land acquisition measures remain: invasive pests and diseases are literally eating away the woodlands that protect the state's drinking water supplies.

Many have probably heard of the emerald ash borer that has already devastated populations of white and green ash, which were some of the most prevalent trees in Highlands forests. This invasive insect causes almost 100% mortality in the areas it infests and the impact on Highlands forests has been profound. Ash has been almost eliminated in Highlands forests.

Hard on the heels of the ash borer, beech leaf disease now threatens the region's beech population. The beech is not only a majestic tree, it plays a key role in ecological health as both habitat and food source for birds and animals. Beech leaf disease is spread by an invasive nematode. First detected in New Jersey in 2020, it has spread rapidly and is now prevalent throughout the Highlands. Two more threats, oak wilt disease, which quickly kills oak trees, and laurel wilt disease, which impacts spicebush and sassafras – two key forest species, are on New Jersey's doorstep. It seems as if the challenges never stop coming.

The state of New Jersey has historically been a leader and innovator in environmental protection, often ahead of the nation. Our response here should be no exception. Proper forest management is particularly critical in the Highlands since so much of the state relies on the region for drinking water. Management and stewardship practices that are designed to increase forest canopy coverage and improve soil health are essential parts of the overall strategy to protect the region and its water resources. The urgency to do this cannot be overstated. Future generations depend on it.

Highlands Open Space & Recreation Plan. Progress on the Highlands Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) is nearing completion. The Highlands Council will entertain a presentation from the project's lead consultant, Trust for Public Land, at the July meeting later this week.

The need for a regional OSRP has become evident over time as the Highlands Council has worked closely with state, local, and private preservation partners piecing together a patchwork of preservation efforts that would benefit from a larger strategic approach, given the importance of the Highlands region to the

state's water supply. In addition, while the Highlands Act put restrictions on development in the region, it did not halt new construction and loss of important resources. Currently, about 38% of land in the Highlands is in some form of permanent preservation. Another 45% is already developed. That leaves around 17% of the Highlands, or about 230 square miles, undeveloped but developable. While not nearly as acute as it was at the time of the Act's adoption, development remains a threat to the region's vital resources.

Funded in part by a grant from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the Highlands OSRP will identify and prioritize properties for preservation and provide an assessment of the financial commitment necessary to protect these lands. The plan will help advance a number of Highlands Act and Regional Master Plan goals. First and foremost is the protection of the natural resources that provide and safeguard the state's drinking water supplies. The forests, streams, and wetlands of the region are not only a part of an important and unique ecological landscape, they are the essential factors that make the Highlands the place that provides the highly urbanized areas of the state with their drinking water.

Preservation in the Highlands also contributes to the abundant recreational opportunities in the region, enjoyed by both the 850,000 people who live here and the millions more who visit each year to hike, fish, kayak, bicycle, hunt, swim, and boat. Additionally, there is a tremendous need to protect the agricultural economy that defines much of the Highlands landscape. Just as with the natural resource and recreational assets of the Highlands, the agricultural resources of the New Jersey Highlands region benefit not only those in the region, but throughout the state and beyond, and Highlands farms are integral to new Jersey's climate resilience.

Investing in the preservation of these Highlands resources is a matter of state-wide importance. A comprehensive plan and road map for coordination and collaboration among the entities empowered to do this will help ensure our success.

Support for Highlands Municipalities. While nearly every resident of the state benefits in some manner from the protection of the Highlands region, the costs and obligations of that protection fall disproportionately on Highlands municipalities, the bulk of which are small, rural communities with limited capacity. This is felt especially in the Preservation Area of the Highlands region where more stringent development restrictions have a greater financial impact. This is an issue that has existed since the inception of the Highlands Act but has become a matter of public discussion in the past year. The attention that has been drawn to difficulties our municipalities face in this regard should be seen as a call to action, particularly since the solution, like so many of the issues that need to be addressed in the region, does not require a huge financial commitment.

The Highlands Council has a limited grant budget to offset costs associated with implementation of the Highlands Act at the local level, and while beneficial, this does not account for all economic impacts. Most Highlands municipalities recognize their obligation to protect and steward the resources within their borders that primarily benefit their fellow New Jersey residents living elsewhere. However, there is often insufficient recognition of the need to counterbalance the financial impact of their efforts. A better methodology of distributing financial support to Highlands communities is necessary.

Having just completed the fiscal year 2027 budget, there should be ample time to propose and implement some type of relief for these municipalities before the 2028 budget is put in place. Broadening the

eligibility criteria for Watershed Moratorium Aid and increasing the amount of that aid would go a long way towards both dealing with the very real fiscal effects of protection of the region's resources and building goodwill with the communities called upon to provide this vital service to the state. Now is the time to start thinking about how to do this in a fiscally responsible manner. The actual investment would be relatively modest, and in the case of Watershed Moratorium Aid, come from an existing source of income; the Realty Transfer Fee. This was a promise made at the time the Highlands Act was adopted and it is now past time to fulfill that pledge.



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.

- **Bloomsbury Borough, Hunterdon County.** Sanitary Sewer Feasibility Study
- **Holland Township, Hunterdon County.** Draft Wastewater Management Plan
- **Hunterdon County,** Historic Preservation Plan
- **Mendham Borough, Morris County.** Conformance Assessment Report

Deliverables Received

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

- **Holland Township, Hunterdon County.** MS4 Data Collection and Map Preparation
- **Montville Township, Morris County.** Floodplain Reconnection and Groundwater Recharge Demonstration Project

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.

- **Borough of Peapack and Gladstone, Somerset County.** Highlands Element and Reexamination Report; Highlands Plan Conformance Ordinance Adoption; Environmental Resource Inventory; Highlands Exemption Ordinance Adoption
- **Byram Township, Sussex County.** Stormwater Management Planning, MS4 Permit Compliance
- **Mount Arlington, Morris County.** Highlands Center Feasibility Study

Scopes/Funding Requests

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

- **Rockaway Borough, Morris County.** Conformance Assessment/Highlands Center Designation Study
- **Mountain Lakes Borough, Morris County.** Stormwater Management Planning
- **Netcong Borough, Morris County.** Hydrogeological Study Phase 2 (well replacement project)

Other Notable Implementation Activities

- **Hunterdon County.** The Highlands Council advised the Hunterdon County Planning Department that it supports the county's request to NJ Transit for an at-grade railroad crossing to improve safety and circulation within a designated Highlands Center near the Annandale Train Station in Clinton Township.
- **Town of Belvidere, Warren County.** The town passed a resolution rescinding its intent to work toward conformance with the Highlands RMP, citing land use limitations.

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). High Ridge Tank Replacement Project**
Washington Township, Morris County
Washington Township Municipal Utility Authority proposes the demolition of an existing standpipe tank, and construction of a new elevated water storage tank and associated infrastructure. *Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent with the Goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act.*
- **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 determination: Defer majority of review to Lopatcong Township and its professionals, noting multiple conditions required prior to planning board action.
- **Conditions Compliance: Planning Area Consistency Review Advanced Cardiology, LLC**
Hackettstown, Warren County
Applicant proposes to expand an existing parking area into undeveloped portions of a property located in a designated Highlands Center within the town. Highlands Council staff received additional information and materials related to the project demonstrating conditions attached to a consistency review completed in November 2025 have been met.
Highlands Council staff finding: All conditions have been met.

- **Conditions Compliance: Preservation Area Consistency Review, General Permit #1 Authorization (w/NJDEP).**

Anglers Anonymous Inc./South Branch of the Raritan River Restoration and Habitat Enhancement.

Washington Township, Morris County

Anglers Anonymous is seeking authorization to conduct a restoration project to improve trout habitat within the South Branch of the Raritan River. This effort is part of a larger restoration/habitat improvement project of the United States Department of Agriculture-Natural Resource Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS), funded through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) with technical support and oversight by the USDA-NRCS. In June 2025, the Highlands Council issued a consistency determination requiring modifications to the project. Highlands Council staff subsequently received sufficient information to determine that the modifications to the project plan have been made.

Highlands Council staff finding: All conditions have been met.

- **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 review in progress.

- **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 review in progress.

- **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 review in progress.

Science Initiatives

- **Highlands Water Quality Monitoring Program.** Water quality sampling and analysis continued in June. Notable findings/sitings included a hellgrammite (larval stage of the dobsonfly) in the Dead River in Bernards Township and a juvenile American eel in the Musconetcong River in Pohatcong Township, both sensitive to water pollution and thus indicators of good water quality.

The eel was found within a duplicate sampling that was taken as part of required quality control measures.

The team also found patches of Didymo ('Rock Snot') in a Passaic River sampling. While not a public health concern, Didymo is an invasive form of algae that is typically found in nutrient-poor environments and can significantly alter aquatic ecosystems.



Above: Hellgrammite. **Center:** Juvenile American Eel. **Right:** *Didymosphenia geminata*, aka 'Rock Snot.'

Land Preservation Program Updates

- **Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP).** The Highlands Regions OSRP is nearing completion and is expected to be released within the next few months. The Highlands Council will receive an update on the project at its public meeting in July.

Outreach, Education & Events

- **NJ Planning & Redevelopment Conference.** Highlands Council planning staff attended the annual New Jersey Planning and Redevelopment Conference (NJPRC), presented by New Jersey Future and APA New Jersey, on June 10-12. Executive Director Ben Spennelli was a panelist at two sessions: "Detention Facilities: The Planning Challenges of Converting Warehouses" (virtual) and "The New State Plan Era: Coordinating Growth, Equity, and Resilience Across New Jersey" (in-person).
- The Highlands Council received and responded to 13 constituent inquiries in June.

Legislative Update

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

Highlands Specific Legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
S452	Steinhardt, Douglas J. Tiver, Latham	Establishes State school aid category to support certain school districts located in municipalities that are part of Highlands or Pinelands preservation areas.	6/26/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Education Committee

Highlands Related Legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
S1836	Singleton, Troy Wimberly, Benjie E.	"Yes, In God's Backyard Act"; Enhances ability of religious and nonprofit organizations to convert certain property to inclusionary developments with affordable housing; authorizes bonds for \$250 million; appropriates \$50 million.	6/1/2026 Reported from Senate Committee as a Substitute, 2nd Reading 6/1/2026 Referred to Senate State Government, Wagering, Tourism & Historic Preservation Committee
S4400/A3966	Diegnan, Patrick J., Jr. Beach, James Karabinchak, Robert J. Bhalla, Ravi S. Collazos-Gill, Alixon	Requires DEP to conduct study of short and long-term effects of water use by large-scale data centers.	6/4/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee
S4401/A4945	Moriarty, Paul D. Beach, James Miller, Cody D. Bailey, David, Jr. Rowan, Maureen	Requires BPU to conduct study on environmental, infrastructural, and financial impacts of data center development in State.	6/4/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee
SCR136/ACR59	Testa, Michael L., Jr. McClellan, Antwan L.	Determines that DEP rules and regulations known as *New Jersey Protecting Against Climate Change - Resilient Environment and Landscapes" are inconsistent with legislative intent.	6/1/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee

Council & Committee Meetings

- **Committee Meetings.** Three Council Committees met in June: RMP Amendment Committee, Plan Conformance Committee, and the Budget & Finance Committee.
- **Public Council Meetings.** The July Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, July 16. The August public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, August 20. 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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