

# Highlands Council Update

March 2026

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Common Watersnake spotted outside Highlands Council office, Chester Township, Morris County

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# Highlands Council Monthly Report

*Summary of Activities* | March 1-31, 2026

## From the Executive Director

**Highlands Agriculture.** Spring is a time of rebirth and high hopes, and here in the Highlands it is also when the new year begins for the region's farmers. Farming is always a risky endeavor. No matter how skilled a farmer is or how many precautions are taken, success is always dependent upon factors that are out of any individual's control. Late freezes, early frosts, drought, excessive rain, pests, and plant diseases are wild cards that can have an impact on every farmer's annual harvest. As if the current two-year drought hasn't been enough of a challenge, the 2026 growing season will bring a host of other obstacles to overcome. This year looks to be a particularly difficult one for agriculture in the Highlands.

In addition to the usual risks noted above, this year farmers in our region are facing problems finding sufficient labor along with astronomical increases in the cost of fertilizers and fuel for equipment. Tariffs have impacted commodity farmers growing corn and soy, which are crops of particular importance in Warren and Hunterdon Counties. Transporting this year's bounty to market will be impacted by rising gasoline prices. And just as farmers are dealing with increased costs, so are consumers, which could be a deterrent to visiting and shopping at local farms. But if you can, please continue to support the farmers of the Highlands this year.

The importance of local agriculture and local food production has never been greater. Make it a point to visit a Highlands farm to pick seasonal produce. Sign up for a share from a farm offering a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) plan. Visit local farmers markets featuring Highlands farmers. Now more than ever it is important to strengthen our local food systems and foster the community connection with our local agricultural economy.

**Forestry in the Highlands.** Last month, the Highlands Council submitted comments on the NJDEP's planned forestry activities for 2027 in the Sparta Mountain Wildlife Management Area, just as the Council has done for the past three years. Those comments can be accessed [here](#).

As has been pointed out by this agency many times, management and stewardship of forested lands in the Highlands is of great importance to the entire state. Approximately 17% of the state's land area provides about 70% of the state's population with some or all of their drinking water, and the reason the Highlands is able to do that is because of the forested land in the region. There is a direct and undisputed correlation between forest protection and water quality, quantity, and the timing of water availability. The connection between forests and water protection was one of the cornerstones for the creation of the United States Forest Service. A United States Department of Agriculture report, *Forests, Water and People: Drinking water supply and forest lands in the Northeast and Midwest United States*, highlighted the importance of properly stewarded forests and drinking water supplies.

To be clear, the Highlands Council does not object to active stewardship and management of forested lands in the region. On the contrary, we have long advocated for updates to the state's 'current' (1995)

Forestry and Wetlands Best Management Practices (BMPs), to incorporate important factors like climate change, the Highlands Act, and the latest science regarding forest management for watershed value. In 2024, Highlands Council staff provided the NJDEP with draft Highlands-specific BMPs along with the research used to develop them. This is necessary because in the Highlands, forestry activities should have a primary purpose of protecting, maintaining, and enhancing the role of forests in safeguarding water supplies, along with avoiding or mitigating impacts to other important Highlands features such as steep slopes, wetlands, first-order streams, and vernal pools.

Forest management is a long-term proposition. 50 years from now, Highlands forests must be healthier and comprise a higher proportion of overall land cover in the region if we are going to adequately protect the state's water supply. The hard work that is necessary to make that a reality must start now. August 10, 2004, the date the Highlands Act was signed, should have marked the low point for the resources of the region and the amount of forest coverage. Since the passage of the Highlands Act, we have only been able to slow the decline of forests in the region. Climate change, along with invasive species, deer over browse, pests and diseases have had a tremendous negative impact on Highlands forests. The Highlands currently is composed of approximately 54% forested land. Consider that the New York City Catskill watershed, which I often use for comparison, is at about 75% forest cover. The comparison is apt because it provides a model for how New Jersey could be managing the forests of the Highlands to improve forest health, forest soil health, and overall forest canopy coverage. To do that, the Highlands Council needs the resources to work with landowners and land managers to implement practices that will move the region towards a much higher proportion of not just forested land, but healthy forested land. Being able to underwrite the costs of better forest management practices is an essential part of a successful strategy to achieve that end. We know what needs to be done, we just need a properly funded program to enable this effort to proceed.

Arbor Day is coming up on Friday, April 24. It's a celebration of trees - specifically, the planting of trees - that has been around for more than 100 years. The notion that trees are vital for a healthy society is not a new one. The rugged forested hills of the New Jersey Highlands have long been the great protectors of New Jersey's water supply. They are still as critical today and will be well into the future. The commitment to their protection must be commensurate.

**Highlands History.** As we draw ever closer to the 250th anniversary of our nation's founding, it is a good time to take a look at the important role that the Highlands played in establishing the United States. While you have probably heard New Jersey referred to as the "Crossroads of the American Revolution," the New Jersey Highlands in particular played an outsized part in the events that helped shape America. Sites and artifacts of the Revolutionary War are found throughout the Highlands and are very accessible to visitors. Whether you are a hard-core historian or just curious about the birth of the U.S., the Highlands is a great place to explore the events that led to the establishment of our country.

George Washington's winter quarters in Morristown, the encampment at Jockey Hollow where the Revolutionary Army spent the harsh winter of 1779, the iron mines and Long Pond Ironworks in the Wyanokie Mountains that supplied the cannons and cannon balls of the American forces, high viewpoints like Fort Nonsense and Federal Hill where Colonials kept watch for British troop movements as well as the routes travelled by both American and British armies are all found, along with dozens of other sites of

interest, in the Highlands. More information along with a map of historic Revolutionary War sites can be found at the [Crossroads of the American Revolution website](#).

The Highlands Council has awarded tourism expansion grants to local governments, Business Improvement Districts, county economic development organizations, and nonprofits to support awareness efforts and promote visitation to the region on the occasion of America's Semiquincentennial. It's just one of many great reasons to come visit the New Jersey Highlands.



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.

- **Washington Township, Warren County.** Environmental Resource Inventory, partial completion of Zoning Map Updates.

### Deliverables Received

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

- **Mountain Lakes, Morris County.** Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI).
- **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.

- **Hunterdon County.** Watershed Management Plan, Musconetcong Watershed, Phase II.
- **Morris County.** Natural Resource Inventory, Floristic Inventory.
- **Washington Township, Warren County.** Zoning Map/Land Use Plan Update, Phase II.

### Grants Approved

The projects below were approved for funding at [the last Highlands Council meeting](#). All Highlands Council grants are reimbursement-based and require an approved scope of work and deliverables before becoming eligible for reimbursement.

- **High Bridge Borough, Hunterdon County.** Water Use and Conservation Management Plan.
- **Washington Township, Warren County.** Highlands Center Designation Study.
- **Green Township, Sussex County.** Drainage Study.
- **Randolph Township, Morris County.** Agricultural Sustainability Grant (Farm to Table).

- **Pohatcong Township, Warren County.** Open Space and Recreation Plan.
- **Hope Township, Warren County.** Initial Assessment Grant.

### Other Notable Implementation Activities

- **Housing Element and Fair Share Plans.** The following towns' HEFSPs have been reviewed by Highlands Council staff and found to be consistent with the RMP. As a result, the plans shall be entitled to "a strong presumption of validity." Meaning, in any cause of action filed against the municipalities contesting an act or decision taken or made as a result of the plan, the court shall give extraordinary deference to the municipalities.
  - Mahwah Township, Bergen County
  - Holland Township, Hunterdon County
- **Highlands Region Tourism Brand.** The Town of Clinton in Hunterdon County provided photos of signage throughout the town where the Highlands brand has been incorporated.



### 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).

- **Conditions Compliance: Bridge Point 78 Phase II**

*Lopatcong Township, Warren County*

The Highlands Council received materials addressing the remaining outstanding conditions on a consistency review originally issued in 2022.

*Highlands Council staff finding: All conditions met*

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP).**

**Ridge Road Wells No. 4 and 30 Facility Upgrades**

*West Milford Township, Passaic County*

Veolia Water New Jersey, Inc. intends to replace an aging treatment system, install a PFAS treatment system, and conduct other upgrades and activities at the subject facility. Disturbance and the site is limited and the amount of impervious surface is unchanged. Staff review finds that no Highlands resources will be affected by this project.

*Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with Goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act*

- Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP). Musconetcong River Road Water Main Replacement Project**  
*Hampton Borough, Hunterdon County*  
 The borough is proposing the installation of an additional water main with associated valves and equipment, as well as a new two-inch copper line for service connections. The proposed changes will improve accessibility for maintenance, repairs, and future system modifications, while also enhancing the borough’s ability to monitor and evaluate water consumption, track usage patterns, identify potential leaks, and optimize overall resource management.  
*Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with Goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act*
- Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP). High Ridge Tank Replacement Project**  
*Washington Township, Morris County*  
 Washington Township Municipal Utility Authority (MUA) proposes the demolition of an existing standpipe tank, and construction of a new elevated water storage tank and associated infrastructure.  
*Highlands Council staff review in progress.*
- Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP). Highview Acres Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP) Outfall Repair and Effluent Flow Meter Improvements**  
*West Milford Township, Passaic County*  
 Veolia Water New Jersey, Inc. is proposing repairs and improvements at a WWTP that are necessary to maintain operations at the facility and ensure the overall reliability and resiliency of the public water system.  
*Highlands Council staff review in progress.*
- Water Allocation Permit (WAP). Weldon Quarry Co, LLC**  
*Hopatcong Borough, Sussex County*  
 The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection has determined that a WAP is required to accommodate stormwater diversion at the site. No increase in water allocation is occurring. Highlands Council staff have reviewed the WAP application for consistency with the Highlands RMP and determined that since the stormwater collected onsite for dust suppression is being returned to the same HUC 14 subwatershed undiminished, net water availability is not impacted.  
*Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the RMP*
- Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment. Natirar Resort Development, LLC, and Somerset County Improvement Authority**  
*Borough of Peapack & Gladstone, Somerset County*  
 An amendment to the Upper Raritan WQMP is required to accommodate the expansion of the current facility. The existing sewer service area would be increased by 7.2 acres with a 17,500 gallons per day increase in wastewater.  
*Highlands Council staff review in progress.*

- **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 review in progress.*

- **NJDEP Comment Request on General Permit #1: Cole’s Mill Dam Removal**

*Califon Borough, Hunterdon County*

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service proposes removal of Cole’s Mill Dam to improve habitat and water quality, and to enhance recreational opportunities within the South Branch of the Raritan River. The dam is currently in disrepair.

*Highlands Council staff review in progress.*

## Science Initiatives

- **Highlands Water Quality Monitoring Program Advances.** The Quality Assurance Project Plan (QAPP) for the new Highlands Council Water Quality Monitoring program has been approved by the NJDEP and preparations continue to launch the program in April. The monitoring program is designed to assist the NJDEP by filling in data gaps in the Highlands region through more frequent monitoring at existing sites and the identification of new sites. The data will be used to better assess, protect, and restore water quality in the freshwaters of the Highlands region. In addition to supplementing NJDEP-collected data, the program will also allow Highlands science staff the opportunity to collect data that is of interest specifically to the Council. Collected data will be used to target and prioritize areas in the Highlands for future protection and/or restoration efforts.
- **Sparta Mountain Wildlife Management Area (WMA) Forest Management.** The Highlands Council has provided comments to Acting NJDEP Commissioner Potosnak regarding planned activities that fall within the Highlands Preservation Area of the WMA. As the Council has indicated in the past, concerns regarding management of this area center on the impacts to water quality, soil structure, and sensitive wildlife habitat that diminish the ecological integrity of one of New Jersey’s most intact forest regions.

## Staffing and Staff Development

- **Open Positions.** The Highlands Council currently has two open positions:
  - **Resource Management Specialist/Forester**  
The Highlands Council is currently seeking an Environmental Specialist to join its science team and help support the work of the Highlands Council. The application deadline is Friday, May 1, 2026. [Complete job description and application instructions](#) (pdf)
  - **Information Technology (IT) Coordinator, part-time/hourly**  
The Highlands Council is currently seeking a part-time IT Coordinator to assist the IT Manager in a wide range of tasks to support users at the Highlands Council office in Chester Township, NJ. The application deadline is Friday, April 17, 2026. [Complete job description and application instructions](#) (pdf)

## Outreach, Education & Events

- Municipal Exemption Determination Training.** Nearly 50 professionals from around the Highlands region attended a training event held at the Highlands Council office on Thursday, March 12. The Highlands Council’s Municipal Exemption Determination Program allows individual municipal employees and professionals to make local determinations on some of the most commonly sought Highlands Act exceptions once they have completed training, received certification, and adopted an associated ordinance. More information about the [Municipal Exemption Determination program](#) is available on the Highlands Council website.
- Upcoming Public Events.**
  - Wednesday, April 15, 2026.** Highlands Council Executive Director Ben Spinelli will be the guest speaker at the regular meeting of the [Fred S. Burroughs North Jersey Chapter of Trout Unlimited](#). Meetings are held at 7:30 p.m. at the Sparta VFW, Main Street, Sparta.
  - Thursday, April 23, 2026.** Highlands Council Executive Director Ben Spinelli will be the featured presenter at an upcoming lunchtime Webinar as part of the Raritan Headwaters Association (RHA) Watershed Tools for Local Leaders Seminar Series. [Registration and more information is available at the RHA website.](#)
- Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 24 inquiries from constituents in March.



## Legislative Update

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

### Highlands Related Legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
<a href="#">A4456 / S3743</a>	Dunn, Aura K. Sweeney, Marisa  Bucco, Anthony M.	Makes supplemental appropriation of \$4.8 million to provide additional operational aid to Jefferson Township Public Schools.	2/24/2026 Introduced in the Assembly, Referred to Assembly Education Committee  3/5/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Education Committee

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
S743 Sca (1R) / A4554	Burzichelli, John J.  Kennedy, James J.	Appropriates \$111.6 million in dedicated natural resource damages revenues to DEP for habitat restoration, land acquisition, and restoration oversight projects.	2/24/2026 Received in the Assembly, Referred to Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee  3/10/2026 Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee
A4632	Sauickie, Alex	Delays for five years the date of certain greenhouse gas emissions and clean energy goals.	3/10/2026 Introduced in the Assembly, Referred to Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee
S2274 / A4696	Ruiz, M. Teresa Burgess, Renee C.  Pintor Marin, Eliana	Requires owner or operator of data center to submit water and energy usage report to BPU.	1/13/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee  3/16/2026 Introduced, Referred to Assembly Telecommunications and Utilities Committee

### Highlands Specific Legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
A4770 / S4041	Dunn, Aura K.  Bucco, Anthony M.	Increases amounts of aid paid to certain municipalities that host watershed lands; increases amount annually appropriated to "Highlands Protection Fund" from realty transfer fee revenues.	3/19/2026 Introduced, Referred to Assembly Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee  3/23/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee

### Council & Committee Meetings

- **Committee Meetings.** The following Highlands Council committees met in March: RMP Amendment, Budget and Finance, and Audit Review.
- **Public Council Meetings.** The April Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, April 16. The May public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, May 21. 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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