

Highlands Council Update

September 2026

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West shore of Lake Mohawk, Sparta Township, Sussex County

photo by Jocelyn van den Akker, GIS Manager.

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | September 1-30, 2026

From the Executive Director

Visit the Highlands. Fall is prime time for visiting the Highlands. While the region has so much to offer year-round, when the calendar rolls around to late September and October things really ramp up. Cooler temperatures, clear blue skies, and beautiful autumn colors provide a great backdrop for day or weekend trips. Hiking across rugged hills, strolling historic downtowns, sampling the goods at local breweries and cideries, and of course stopping by a Highlands farm to pick apples or pumpkins, navigate a corn maze, or enjoy a ride on a hay wagon, are just some of the things you can do here. Fill out your passport on the [Morris County Farm Trail](#) or the [Hunterdon County Beer Trail](#). With so much to do, there's no real reason to pick only one activity.

Visitation to Highlands farms is particularly important this year. Unpredictable weather, including a disastrous late April freeze, along with skyrocketing costs for fuel and fertilizer, have put a squeeze on the region's agricultural industry. Farming is an important part of the economy in the Highlands and an essential component of the region's identity. Each year it draws tens of thousands of visitors from the New York and Philadelphia metropolitan areas as well as from the rest of New Jersey. Supporting our farmers this year will help ensure that they'll still be here next year when harvest season comes around again. For ideas and help planning your visit you can check in with enjoynjhighlands.com.

Open Space & Recreation Plan. The Highlands Council will be releasing its first ever region-wide Open Space and Recreation Plan in the next few weeks. Currently, nearly 230 of the region's 1,340 square miles remain undeveloped but developable. This is true even with the restrictions of the Highlands Act in place. Approximately 19,000 lots across the Highlands can still see additional development. Preserving land in the Highlands benefits the entire state. 17% of the state's land area provides around 70% of the population with some or all of its drinking water.

The plan has identified more than 450 high-value priority properties that should be protected from future development. Factors such as water protection resources, opportunities to expand existing parks, public access, and key connections between already preserved lands were considered in developing that list. It includes land that is appropriate for outright acquisition and properties that would best be protected by conservation easements. Funding for preservation of these properties is not only essential to protecting the region's assets, it is an investment in protecting the future of the entire state of New Jersey.

Prior to the passage of the Highlands Act in 2004, nearly 17,000 acres of forested land and 8,000 acres of farmland were being lost to development annually. The provisions of the Act slowed that conversion substantially but did not halt development in the region. Development has continued, primarily in the Planning Area portion of the Highlands, albeit at a reduced rate. Continuing to protect land in the region through various preservation programs remains a key component of the overall strategy to protect the vital resources found here. The Open Space and Recreation Plan provides a blueprint for future efforts and a way to coordinate the actions of state, county, municipal, and nonprofit entities working in the region. The

plan also provides a very strong argument for substantial dedicated funding for the Highlands Council's land preservation programs.

Monitoring Program Recommendation Report. In September, the Highlands Council voted to release the draft Monitoring Program Recommendation Report (MPRR) for public comment. This is a periodic review of the Council's work to assess both the effectiveness of existing programs and the need for new programs and resources to allow the Council to fulfill its mission of protecting the state's drinking water supply. You can download and review the draft report and find instructions for providing comments [here](#).

The MPRR not only assesses past and current work of the Council, it provides the foundation for future efforts. Proposed actions of the Council, such as adding elements to the Regional Master Plan (RMP) addressing issues such as climate change, region-wide impervious coverage limits, and siting, design, and limitations on data centers need to find a foundation in the contents of this report. Additionally, the MPRR provides justification for providing resources and funding for programs that support natural resource restoration, land stewardship, land preservation, agricultural retention, sustainable economic development, and financial support for Highlands municipalities and more.

The importance of the work of the Highlands Council to the future of New Jersey cannot be overstated. There is no more fundamental responsibility of government than ensuring a reliable supply of clean drinking water for the people it serves. It is vital for the long-term economic, social, and environmental sustainability of the entire state. While the Council has been successful in many areas, there is much that remains to be done, particularly in the face of the uncertainties created by climate change and the potential impact on the region's resources. Making certain that the Council is pursuing appropriate goals, taking effective measures, and most importantly, is provided with the necessary resources to carry out its mission, is essential for ensuring a prosperous future for our great state.



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.

- **Bethlehem Township, Hunterdon County.** MS4 Permit Compliance/Stormwater Management Planning (partial completion)
- **Bloomsbury Borough, Hunterdon County.** Sanitary Sewer Feasibility Study-Phase 1
- **Hope Township, Warren County.** MS4 Permit Compliance/Stormwater Management Planning (partial completion)
- **Montville Township, Morris County.** Floodplain Reconnection and Groundwater Recharge Demonstration Project (partial completion)

- **Sparta Township, Sussex County.** Conformance Assessment Report
- **Byram Township, Sussex County.** East Brookwood Stormwater Management Study

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.** Adopted Land Use Ordinance

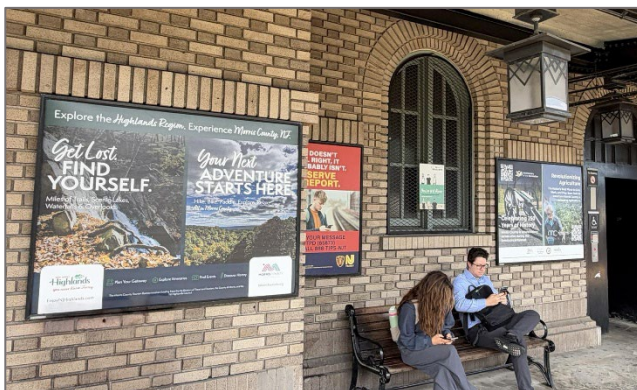
Approved Scopes

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

Other Notable Implementation Activities

- **Public Comment on Petition: Milford Borough, Hunterdon County.** At the request of Milford Borough and as part of the Plan Conformance process, Highlands Council staff have completed a review of the borough's planning and regulatory documents for consistency with the Highlands RMP. The Highlands Council is accepting public comments on that report through Saturday, October 24, 2026. [A copy of the report and the public notice providing details about how to submit comments is available on the Milford Borough page of the Highlands Council website.](#)
- **Public Comment: RMP Monitoring Program.** The Highlands Council recently completed its periodic review of the Highlands RMP and is now accepting public comments on the recommendations that will be included in the 2026 RMP Recommendation Report. [A copy of the report and the public notice providing details about how to submit comments is available on the Monitoring Program page of the Highlands Council website.](#) Comments are being accepted through Wednesday, November 18.
- **Tourism Expansion Grants.** The Morris County Tourism Bureau recently launched a Fall campaign consisting of posters at New Jersey Transit stations both inside and outside the Highlands region, that included Highlands region branding (photos of train station signs and details)



Left: Co-branding Morris County and the New Jersey Highlands in the Morristown train station.



Right: Detail of poster at the Denville train station.

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 Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP). Veolia Water New Jersey, Inc. Barry Lakes Wellhouse - Phase 2 PFAS Treatment**

Vernon Township, Sussex County

In response to rapidly rising PFAS contamination levels, Veolia Water New Jersey, Inc. is proposing to install a new PFAS treatment system, piping, and instrumentation inside of the existing Barry Lakes Storage Garage building to treat raw water from two wells located onsite.

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

- **Planning Area Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11. Rockland Electric Company (RECO) Shoreline Armoring**

Mahwah Township, Bergen County

RECO plans to perform streambank armoring to address erosion concerns at a transmission tower in Mahwah Township to protect critical infrastructure adjacent to Masonicus Brook. The project involves establishing temporary access; soil erosion and sediment control measures; excavation of bank soils; installation of sheet piling, stone fill materials, and final grading; followed by restoration of all work areas.

Highlands Council staff determination: Exempt

- **Planning Area Exemption Determination. Exemption #4**

Town of Clinton, Hunterdon County

Project involved improvements to an existing building and signage on the property

Highlands Council staff finding: Exempt

- **Planning Area Consistency Review. Ten Waterview Boulevard**

Parsippany-Troy Hills, Morris County

Project proposes the construction of a 12,619 square-foot structure (proposed early-education/daycare center) and associated parking on an undeveloped portion of a parcel.

Highlands Council staff review pending.

- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment. Astrodyne/Newburgh Road Residential Development**

Washington Township, Morris County

A site-specific amendment to the Upper Delaware Water Quality Management Plan is required to accommodate the construction of 289 residential units (market rate and affordable) on a 33-acre undeveloped site with previously made improvements to accommodate a planned industrial development. Wastewater will be conveyed to and treated by the Hackettstown SSA. Potable water will be provided by the Hackettstown MUA.

Highlands Council staff review pending.

Science Initiatives

- **Highlands Water Quality Monitoring Program.** The first-ever Highlands Council Water Quality Monitoring program wrapped up in September. A total of 17 sites across the Highlands region (16 public, 1 private) were selected for monitoring based on gaps in statewide data.

Information collected has been submitted to NJDEP, and a review of the program and Quality Assurance Project Plan, as well as data analysis are forthcoming.

- **Natural Climate Solutions Grant Program.** Highlands Council Science Staff are coordinating with organizations and agencies in the Highlands region on a possible grant application in this program. The opportunity is being offered by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Climate Change Mitigation and Monitoring and is made possible by New Jersey's participation in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI).

Land Preservation Program Updates

- **Federal Highlands Region Update.** The Highlands Council supported a request from the Township of Kingwood in Hunterdon County to be included within the boundary of the Federal Highlands region as maintained by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Inclusion in the Federal Highlands region makes Kingwood eligible for financial and technical assistance for land preservation projects through the Highlands Conservation Act grant program.

Outreach, Education & Events

- **Upcoming Events.** In October the Highlands Council will have a presence at two back-to-back events.
 - **The North Jersey Rivers Conference.** Friday, October 16, 2026, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., held at the Lackland Center at Centenary University in Hackettstown, Warren County. In addition to having an information table at [this event](#), Highlands Council Executive Director Ben Spinelli will be speaking at a session about Forest Management Best Practices, along with Dr. Michael van Clef, a noted ecologist based in the New Jersey Highlands.
 - **Sussex County Harvest, Honey, and Garlic Festival.** Saturday, October 17, 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. at the Sussex County Fairgrounds in Augusta, Sussex County. The Highlands Council will once again have an information table as [this is a large event](#) that draws thousands of visitors from New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania.

Legislative Update

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

Highlands Related Legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
A5570	Reynolds-Jackson, Verlina	"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. Defines an "environmentally protected area" to include, among other areas, the Highlands Preservation Area, wetlands, flood hazard areas, preserved farmland, and certain forested areas.	9/24/26 Introduced in the Assembly, Referred to Assembly Housing Committee.

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
A1517 / S4636	Calabrese, Clinton	Establishes NJ Native Seed Commission to develop plan to increase production and use of native seeds in State.	9/28/26 Received in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee

Council & Committee Meetings

- Public Council Meetings.** The October Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, October 15. There is no public meeting in November. The December public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, December 10. 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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