



JON S. CORZINE
Governor

State of New Jersey

Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council
100 North Road (Route 513)
Chester, New Jersey 07930-2322
(908) 879-6737
(908) 879-4205 (fax)
www.highlands.state.nj.us



JOHN R. WEINGART
Chairman

EILEEN SWAN
Executive Director

Summary of Testimony
Eileen Swan, Executive Director
Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council
before the Senate Environment Committee
May 8, 2008

Chairman Smith and Members of the Senate Environment Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee regarding the proposed constitutional amendment to dedicate revenue from a water consumption user fee to the protection of the State's natural resources and important farmland. I am Eileen Swan, the Executive Director of New Jersey's Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council and I am here on behalf of the Council to express the Council's strong support this initiative.

As a source of drinking water for over half of the State of New Jersey, the protection and conservation of the Highlands Region is an issue of Statewide importance. In releasing its Regional Master Plan last November, the Highlands Council supported the need for a dedicated and stable source of funding for the purpose of land acquisition and conservation with funds specifically dedicated for the Highlands Region to protect the State's drinking water supplies, to preserve ecosystem integrity, and to promote the agricultural industry of the Highlands.

Land preservation is an essential tool as we work to maintaining land's ability to collect and purify water. And yet implementation of the Regional Master Plan is set to begin just as the original funding for the Garden State Preservation Trust Fund is running out. It is vitally important that a steady source of funds be made available for land acquisition and conservation easements in the Highlands Region, both so that State can achieve its preservation objectives and so the landowners of this region have viable options for use and disposition of their property. The Highlands Act included a specific mandate for additional funding through "a strong and significant commitment by the State to fund the acquisition of exceptional natural resource value lands." The Legislature's commitment to provide additional funding for the Highlands Region in 2004 has been a central theme in the public, municipal and county comments on the Regional Master Plan. Essentially, the public is generally more willing to accept the stringent environmental standards imposed by the Highlands Act as long as this "strong and significant commitment by the State" is met.

Another common thread, as proposed in the Regional Master Plan and supported throughout much of the Highlands Region, is that the enactment of a stable source of funding through a water consumption fee is an equitable mechanism to provide the necessary funds for land preservation. The use of a water consumption fee would specifically address four fundamental goals of the

Highlands Act: 1) to protect and enhance the significant values of the Highlands Region's resources including both natural and agricultural lands; 2) to protect, restore, and enhance the quality and quantity of surface and ground waters; 3) to preserve to the maximum extent possible environmentally sensitive lands; and 4) to promote conservation of water resources. Through the establishment of a water consumption fee, the State would be emphasizing the necessary interrelationship between those residents outside of Highlands that rely upon the actions of Highlands Region's residents to protect the Region's water quality and quantity. Similarly, a water user fee would create a necessary financial incentive to conserve water resources to protect the Region's water supply.

Mr. Chairman, your proposed initiative is modest and yet it can do so much to protect water resources, agricultural lands, and source water lands. Providing additional funding for the Highlands Region is needed now. Source water lands need to be protected before they are lost. Timely funding needs to be provided to landowners. Lastly, funding is necessary to ensure that the Regional Master Plan that will soon be adopted will be successful. The Council strongly supports this Committee's action on this crucial issue and stands ready to assist in any way we can.