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NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS COUNCIL



Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan

NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS WATER PROTECTION AND PLANNING COUNCIL

Funding for this plan was made possible through a Highlands Conservation Act Grant from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Office of Conservation Investment.

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NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS COUNCIL

Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan

NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS WATER PROTECTION AND PLANNING COUNCIL

SEPTEMBER 2026



Splitrock Reservoir, Rockaway Township, Morris County (Highlands Council)

Letter from the Highlands Council Executive Director

The New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council is proud to present its first-ever regional Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP). The need for a regional OSRP has become evident over time as the Highlands Council has worked closely with federal, state, local, and private preservation partners, piecing together a patchwork of preservation efforts that would benefit from a larger strategic approach, particularly given the importance of the Highlands region to the state's water supply. This plan provides that approach.

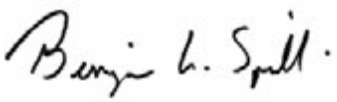
While many believe that land within the region was permanently protected with the passage of the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act 2004, it was not. Today, approximately 230 square miles, or about 17 percent, of the Highlands region remain undeveloped, but developable, even under the restrictions of the Act. Although not nearly as acute as it was at the time of the Act's adoption, development pressure remains a threat to the region's vital resources.

The land preservation data and tools contained in this plan will help advance a number of Highlands Council goals. First and foremost is the protection of the natural resources that safeguard a primary water source for New Jersey. The forests, streams and wetlands of the region are not only a part of an important and unique ecological landscape, they are essential to ensuring a reliable supply of drinking water for 70 percent of New Jersey residents, including those in the highly urbanized areas.

Preservation of farmland and protection of the agriculture industry is another essential goal of the Highlands Council that this plan will inform. The Highlands region is home to more than 125,000 acres of land in active agricultural production. Highlands farms are a significant economic driver and a source of local food for the region and beyond. Agritourism and farm visits bring tens of thousands of visitors to the Highlands each year.

Protecting and enhancing the abundant recreational opportunities in the region is another key goal of the Highlands Council that this plan supports. The 850,000 people who live here and the millions more who visit each year know the Highlands as a great place to hike, fish, kayak, bicycle, hunt, swim, and boat. Expanding and connecting existing parks and trails, providing water access, and protecting large-scale environmentally important landscapes are all part of a strategy to enable the public to enjoy the region's natural beauty.

It is clear that investing in the protection of all these Highlands resources is a matter of state-wide importance. This comprehensive roadmap for coordination and collaboration among the entities empowered to do so will help ensure our success. We thank the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for its support of this plan and ongoing partnership in protection of the Highlands region.



Benjamin L. Spinelli, Esq.
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Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

ABBREVIATION	DEFINITION
ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
EJ	Environmental Justice
GIS	Geographic Information Systems
Highlands Act, Highlands Planning Act	New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act
Highlands Council	New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council
Highlands Region OSRP	New Jersey Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan
Highlands Region, the Highlands, the Region	New Jersey Highlands Region
NJDEP	New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection
OBC	Overburdened Communities under the New Jersey Environmental Justice rule
OSRP	Open Space and Recreation Plan
Highlands RMP	Highlands Regional Master Plan
TPL	Trust for Public Land
TWENTYTWENTY	TWENTYTWENTY Public Affairs
USFWS	United States Fish and Wildlife Service
USGS	United States Geological Survey

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Ramapo River, Mahwah Township, Bergen County
(Highlands Council)

Executive Summary

The New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council, in partnership with Trust for Public Land and TWENTYTWENTY Public Affairs, prepared the Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP). This plan describes priorities, guidelines, and tools for open space and recreation preservation in the New Jersey Highlands Region pursuant to the 2004 Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act.

The stakeholder process and analyses of current conditions and future pressures led to the establishment of OSRP goals for open space, outdoor recreation, and agricultural preservation. The goals are the bedrock for a clear and transparent approach to land conservation and recreation prioritization and planning in the Highlands region.

Stakeholder engagement was central to the development of the plan. A multi-pronged approach ensured broad and representative input, including a survey of outdoor recreation users across the region, interviews with key stakeholders, and ongoing guidance from a steering committee supported by three focused subcommittees. This process captured diverse perspectives and grounded the plan in both community needs and expert insight.

This OSRP establishes a comprehensive framework to guide the protection and preservation of the region's natural, agricultural, and recreational resources. It identifies community priorities and evaluates recreational assets. It also prepares communities and land trusts to protect open space, expand outdoor recreation opportunities, and support working lands.

The plan is designed to inform decision-making, align future investment, and position the region to leverage funding and partnership opportunities. The Highlands Council's goal in developing the Highlands Region OSRP is to better optimize the balance of conservation and development in the region through analyses of resources and stakeholder needs, stronger relationships with partners, and proactive strategies for land acquisition and management.

Following the guidelines of the Highlands Act and the goals of the Highlands RMP, the Highlands Region OSRP:

1. **catalogs existing open space and recreation lands;**
2. **identifies additional parcels that may be appropriate for outdoor recreation, open space conservation, and farmland and historic resource preservation; and**
3. **provides a stakeholder-driven framework for acquiring future open space and recreational opportunities.**



Merrill Creek Reservoir, Harmony Township,
Warren County (Highlands Council)

Chapter 1.
Introduction

The New Jersey Highlands region is a physiographic area of northern New Jersey comprised of 88 municipalities within sections of seven counties and includes both rural and densely developed areas. In 2004, the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act ("The Highlands Act," N.J.S.A. 13:20-1 et seq.) established the boundaries of the Highlands region and created the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council (Highlands Council).

The Highlands Council is the regional planning agency that oversees implementation of the Act. It consists of a 15-member appointed body and a staff of professional planners, environmental scientists, geographic information systems (GIS) professionals, and administrative personnel.[1]

The Highlands Act directed the development of the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP), adopted in 2008.[2] The Highlands Act states that the RMP should "preserve extensive and, to the maximum extent possible, contiguous areas of land in its natural state, thereby ensuring the continuation of a Highlands environment which contains the unique and significant natural, scenic, and other resources representative of the Highlands Region." Furthermore, the Highlands Act states the RMP should include goals to "preserve farmland and historic sites and other historic resources" and "preserve outdoor recreation opportunities, including hunting and fishing, on publicly owned land."[3]

Along with the adoption of the RMP was the adoption of a Land Preservation and Stewardship Technical Report that outlined the goals, priorities, and methods for land preservation in the region. Because of its importance to the region, land preservation has always been a central focus of the Highlands Council.

Plan Statement of Purpose

The Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) is a planning document that presents a comprehensive approach to support and identify preservation opportunities in the Highlands region. Following the guidelines of the Highlands Act and the goals of the Highlands RMP, the Highlands Region OSRP:

1) catalogs existing open space and recreation lands;
2) identifies additional parcels that may be appropriate for outdoor recreation, open space conservation, and farmland and historic resource preservation; and
3) provides a stakeholder-driven framework for acquiring future open space and recreational opportunities.

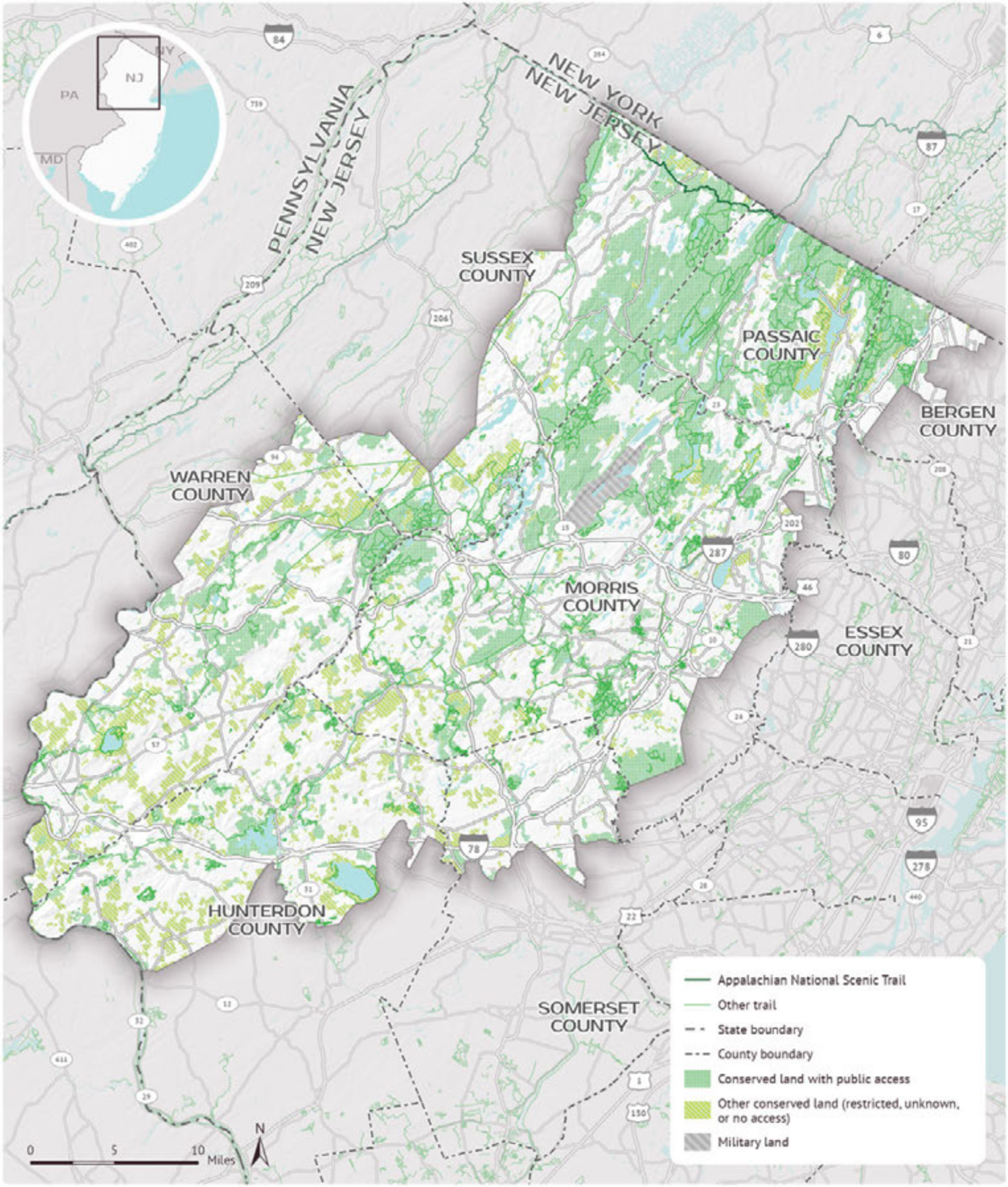
The OSRP leverages stakeholder input to establish priorities for environmentally sensitive and culturally significant lands, uses innovative mapping approaches to ground the priorities in evidence, and identifies potential funding sources needed to meet these goals. Multi-layered stakeholder engagement guided the plan to ensure broad representation and regional subject matter expertise. Special attention was paid to historically disadvantaged communities to help address equity challenges and incorporate environmental justice principles, in order to propose open space and recreation projects that would benefit all residents of the Highlands Region.

Plan Development

The Highlands Council engaged Trust for Public Land (TPL) and TWENTYTWENTY Public Affairs (TWENTYTWENTY) to create the OSRP and to help meet the goals of the Highlands Act. TPL conducted GIS analyses, convened steering committee and subcommittee meetings, and researched funding opportunities for conservation opportunities in the Highlands region to inform the plan. TWENTYTWENTY led stakeholder engagement. They conducted an outdoor recreation user survey and informational interviews, developed a stakeholder engagement plan, and built outreach toolkits for land acquisition and funding.

Open Space, Recreation, and Agriculture in the Highlands

The New Jersey Highlands Region is an approximately 860,000-acre portion of the federal Highlands Region, an area that has been recognized as a landscape of special significance by the United States Forest Service. In addition to federal recognition, the State of New Jersey designated the

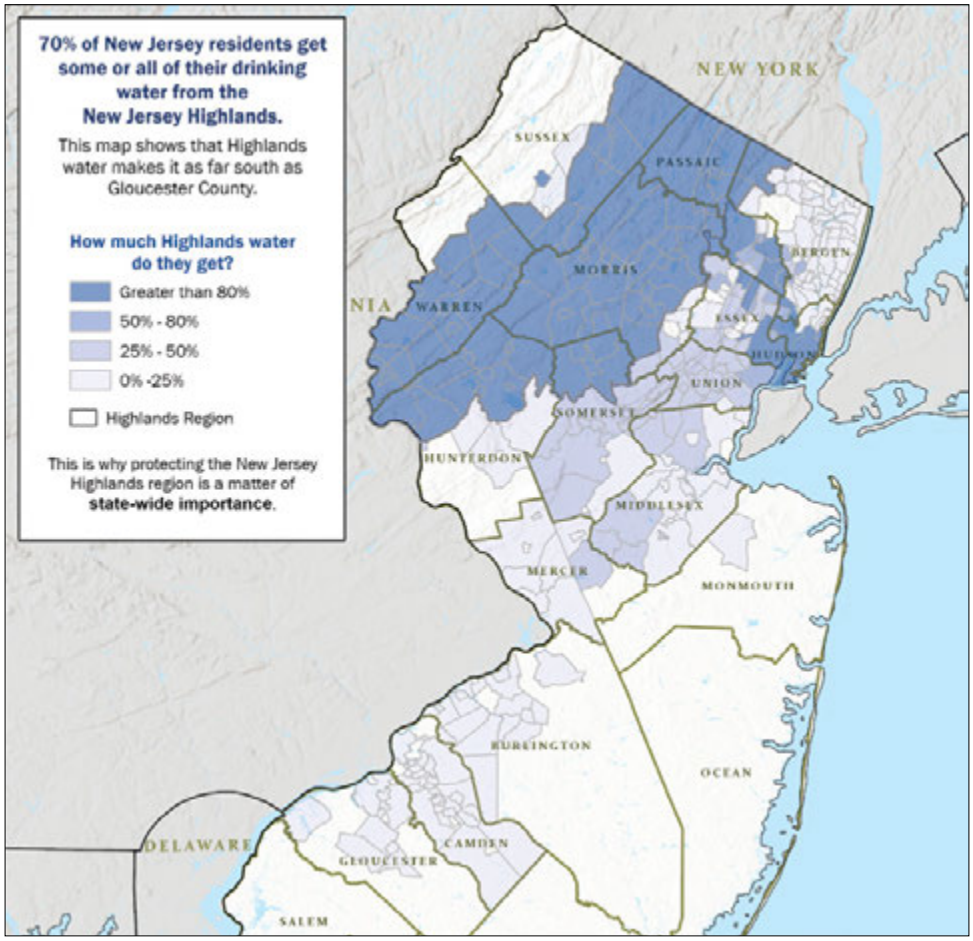


Study Area

HIGHLANDS REGION OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLAN

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New Jersey Highlands as a Special Resource Area in the 2001 State Development and Redevelopment Plan. Adoption of the Highlands Act and the establishment of the Highlands Council followed in 2004.

The natural resources of the Highlands Region—which include forest lands, wetlands, reservoirs, and agricultural lands—provide an attractive environment for residents and visitors. These resources also provide 70% of New Jersey residents with some or all of their drinking water.[4]

The Highlands Region is home to over 830,000 residents and provides recreational, agricultural, historical, and cultural resources to millions more as it is within a two-hour drive of over 20 million people. The Highlands Region also supports just over 126,000 acres of active agricultural lands, further contributing to the economic vitality and wellbeing of New Jersey communities.

Importance of Land Preservation in the Highlands Region

The natural resources of the Highlands Region support endangered species, scenic vistas, agriculture, small towns, manufacturing, and the water supplies for New Jersey's largest metropolitan areas. However, development pressure has put many of these resources at risk in the last 70 years. The Highlands Act was created to protect the region's natural resources and water supplies.

Land preservation is a critical tool to protect these benefits for Highlands Region residents and visitors, including supporting climate resiliency and economic development. The Highlands Region faces significant climate risks, including wildfire and flooding, which can be mitigated by appropriate land protection. Outdoor recreation and agricultural tourism help bolster the economic wellbeing of the region, attracting visitors, encouraging overnight stays, and providing employment opportunities to residents. Additional information on climate risks, outdoor recreation, and the role of land preservation in addressing them can be found in Chapter 3.



Cross Estate Gardens, Bernardsville Borough, Somerset County (Highlands Council)

Chapter 2.
Public Outreach and Stakeholder Engagement

The Highlands Council worked with TWENTYTWENTY and TPL to engage stakeholders to guide OSRP goal setting and preservation priorities.

Public outreach strategies helped identify the open space, recreation, and agricultural priorities and needs of the people who live, work, and play in the Highlands Region. Fifty-one individuals participated in the steering committee and three subcommittees for the OSRP, broadly representing interests across the Highlands Region.

TWENTYTWENTY developed an Outreach and Stakeholder Engagement Plan for the OSRP to engage directly with Highlands Region communities, to deepen the Council's understanding of stakeholders' needs, and to facilitate meaningful participation in the OSRP planning process. The plan suggested public communications tactics, and outreach activities to solicit feedback from outdoor recreation users on their open space use, perceptions, and priorities in the Highlands Region. To implement the plan, the Highlands Council and its planning partners established a Steering Committee and topic-focused subcommittees; interviewed key stakeholders in open space planning, outdoor recreation, and agricultural preservation; and conducted a region-wide survey in English and Spanish.

TWENTYTWENTY also developed and maintained a comprehensive stakeholder database, with emphasis placed on reaching people in Overburdened Communities, as defined by the New Jersey Environmental Justice Law.[5]

Steering Committee

The OSRP Steering Committee helped guide the development of goals and analyses that informed the plan. Steering committee members included local, regional, and state stakeholders with expertise and interest in open space, recreation, and agriculture in the Highlands. The steering committee met every other month to review draft outreach, planning, and technical documents and assisted with public outreach by utilizing their membership and constituency relationships.

The OSRP Steering Committee also reviewed and made recommendations for stakeholder engagement. Their feedback informed themes, topic, and strategies in the OSRP outreach plan.

A list of steering committee participants is located after the title page of the report.

Subcommittees

To inform preservation priorities and guidelines, three subcommittees of local, regional, and state stakeholders were formed:

- Open Space and Farmland,
- Outdoor Recreation, and
- Acquisition and Funding.

Further information on the subcommittees' roles in setting regional goals can be found in Chapter 4. For a full list of steering committee and subcommittee members, please refer to the Acknowledgements section.

Stakeholder Interviews

To ensure the OSRP included a diversity of perspectives, TWENTYTWENTY interviewed key stakeholders from:

- the City of Newark;
- Sussex, Hunterdon, Passaic, and Warren Counties;
- PeaceNJ (People Enjoying Active Conservation of the Environment in New Jersey); and
- the Township of Parsippany-Troy Hills.

The steering committee recommended engagement with these stakeholders to inform the outreach plan (included as Appendix B).

Outdoor Recreation Survey

TWENTYTWENTY conducted an online survey to help the Highlands Council understand:

- patterns and trends in open space use in the region,
- user needs and preferences,
- obstacles or access challenges people may encounter when recreating in the region, and
- the public's interest for acquiring and preserving open space for natural resource protection and outdoor recreational use.

The survey was shared with public officials, local libraries, community centers, local press, and other key stakeholders online and at local events. The Highlands Council shared the survey on social media and hung flyers with the survey link for visitors and council meeting attendees. Steering committee members also distributed the survey directly to their members and via their social media channels. TWENTYTWENTY developed a survey communications toolkit and included social media graphics and text for websites, newsletters, and emails.

TWENTYTWENTY prioritized outreach to Overburdened Communities in the region, and the survey was translated into Spanish. PeaceNJ, a local community-based organization, helped conduct outreach to Spanish-speaking residents in the region. (Additional information on outreach to Spanish-speaking communities is included in Chapter 3).

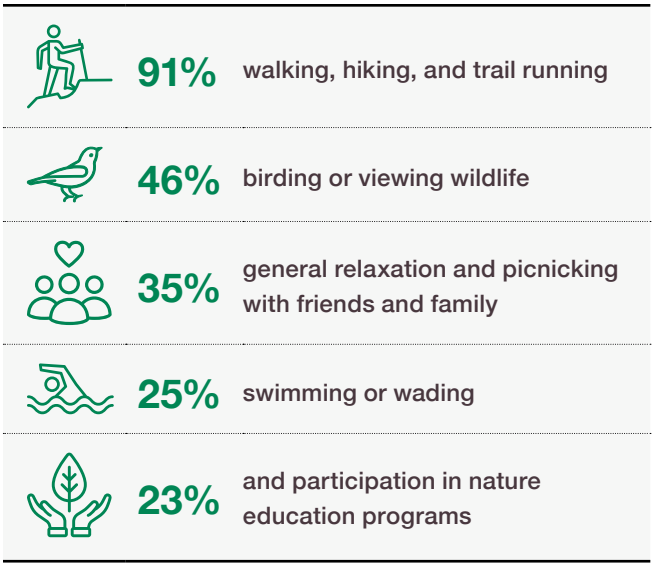
These survey results communicate the value of open space and recreational opportunities to the Highlands Region, and serve several purposes. The findings surfaced preferences for open space protection, usage patterns for different activities, and obstacles to participation that can be addressed to improve the quality of existing outdoor recreation opportunities.

In total, there were 739 responses to the English-language survey and 22 responses to the Spanish-language survey. Fifty-seven percent of the respondents were residents in the Highlands region, and the rest were visitors.

The key takeaways from the outdoor recreation survey are as follows:

- People are willing to travel for up to two hours to enjoy the Highlands Region's open space and recreational opportunities.
- The top outdoor recreation activities were walking, hiking, and trail running (91%); birding or viewing wildlife (46%); general relaxation and picnicking with friends and family (35%); swimming or wading (25%); and participation in nature education programs (23%) (Figure 1). This generally mirrored the activities respondents were interested in participating in in the future.

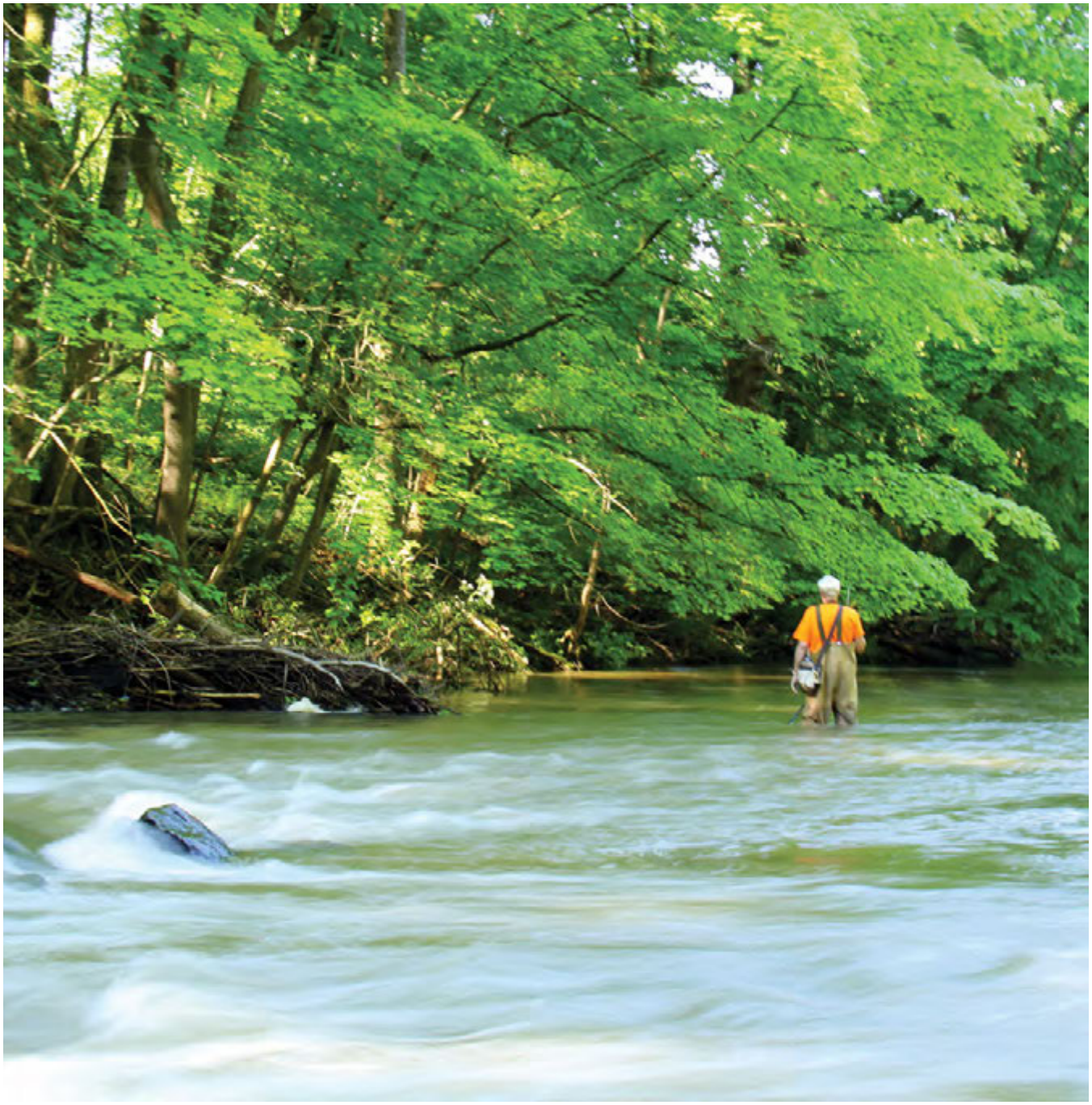
FIGURE 1. OSRP Survey Respondents' Top Outdoor Recreation Activities:



- Respondents also shared their interest in Dark Sky designations for lands with exceptionally starry nights, waterfront access, nature and wildlife photography opportunities, and botany observation.[6]
- Respondents expressed strong interest in preserving additional open space for natural areas, with 93% of them saying it was extremely important (compared to 65% of residents stating it was extremely important to preserve open space for active recreation).
- Respondents identified a need for maintenance and rehabilitation of historic structures and trails, including invasive species management.
- Respondents expressed an interest in seeing more wildlife sanctuaries or nature areas; trails for walking, hiking, or running; and information kiosks and signage.
- Parking was raised as a need among the respondents who were prevented from enjoying outdoor recreation in the Highlands Region, in addition to issues (or conflicts) with off-road vehicles and maintenance challenges.
- Respondents noted that ADA and access improvements throughout the Highlands Region should be a key consideration in developing open space and recreational opportunities.

The results of the outdoor recreation survey were incorporated into the regional goals, informing the framework for future preservation efforts in the Highlands Region. Organizations working in open space conservation and outdoor recreation across the region should also consider the survey results as an advocacy and planning tool. For example, the findings can help prioritize investments, such as pursuing new preserved areas or addressing obstacles to outdoor recreation accessibility and quality, including signage, parking, or user conflict.

For the OSRP, the survey findings informed the preservation goals and mapping analyses detailed in Chapters 4 and 5. For example, TPL noted that survey respondents suggested they were willing to drive much further than anticipated to access outdoor recreation activities in the Highlands Region (36% said they were comfortable driving at least an hour to access outdoor recreation opportunities in the Highlands Region). This expanded the standard 10-minute drive level of service analysis to 30 minutes (as a 1-hour drive time covered most of the Highlands Region).



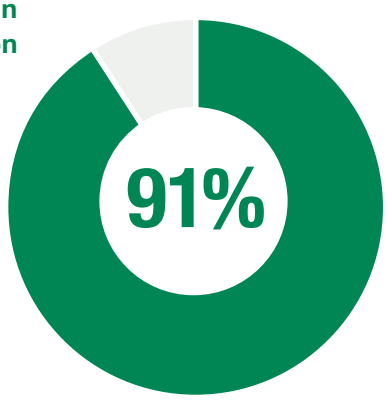
Pohatcong Creek, Pohatcong Township, Warren County (Highlands Council)



Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, Bernards Township, Somerset County (Highlands Council)

Highlands Region Survey Results

Survey respondents had participated in outdoor recreation in the Highlands Recreation



While 36% of respondents didn't have any road blocks to enjoying outdoor recreation in the Highlands, some visitors faced challenges.

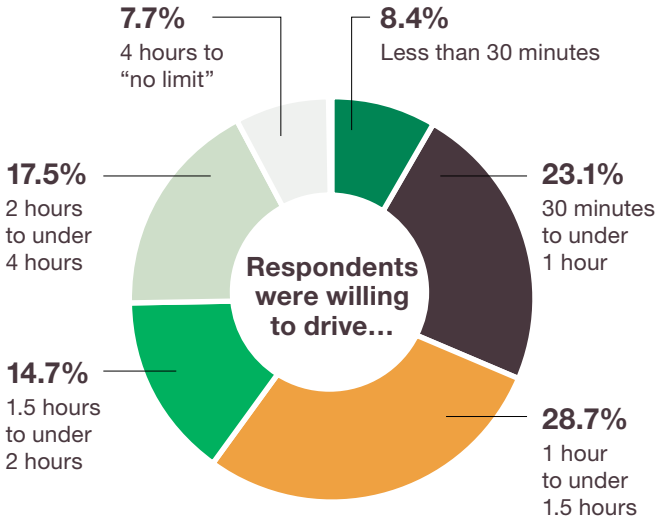
Other	17.4%
Lack of parking	17.3%
Lack of facilities (including restrooms and water fountains)	15.5%
Too crowded	13.0%
Lack of signage	13.0%
Unsure where to go	12.6%

"Other" responses included off-road vehicles; lack of state or county resources to maintain areas; trash or litter; invasive species; ticks and mosquitoes; not enough time for recreation; off-leash dogs; unsafe road or lack of connection between sites; and logging impacting experience.

Respondents wanted to see more:

- **55%** Trails
- **55%** Wildlife sanctuaries or nature areas
- **30%** Informational kiosks or signage
- **30%** More facilities (like picnic tables, restrooms, water fountains, and cookout areas)
- **24%** Waterfront access areas

Most respondents (28.7%) were willing to drive 1 to 1.5 hours to access recreation opportunities in the Highlands Region; nearly 8% were willing to drive 4 hours or more!



Respondents were most interested in participating in:

- **92.3%** Walking, hiking, and trail running
- **53.8%** Birding or viewing wildlife
- **44.4%** Picnicking or visiting with friends or family
- **38.6%** Educational nature programs
- **31.4%** Swimming or wading
- **29.6%** Stargazing
- **27.1%** Boating
- **26.3%** Winter activties (like cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, or sledding)



Norvin Green State Forest, Ringwood Borough,
Passaic County (Highlands Council)

Chapter 3.

Highlands Region at a Glance: History, Land Use, Demographics, and Climate

This section describes the region's geography, past and current land uses, climate risks and resiliency, and demographics within the Highlands Region.

Understanding the historical and current context of the region ensures that the OSRP is tailored to communities in the Highlands, as well as its many visitors, who benefit from the region's open spaces through recreational opportunities, a clean water supply, strong agricultural and ecotourism industries, and flood and fire protection.

Historical and Current Context of the Highlands Region

HISTORY OF THE LAND

The Highlands Region landscape, as it is known today, was formed after the final retreat of the Wisconsin Glacier around 10,000 B.C. The glacier scraped terrain and filled aquifers, making the lands suitable for the hardwood forests that still dominate the region today. Although European settlers significantly altered the landscape through deforestation, more than half of the region remains forested. These forests support air purification and carbon sequestration and provide habitat for many plants and animals, including threatened and endangered species.

Forests also play an essential role in filtering water and recharging groundwater. Together with the region's abundant freshwater lakes and rivers, they make the Highlands Region a critical drinking water source for the state. The region supplies some or all of the drinking water for 70% of New Jersey residents across 15 of the state's 21 counties.[7] To help protect this vital state resource, along with the region's other diverse natural resources, the Highlands Act was established in 2004.[8]

Additionally, the Highlands Region is crossed by several bands of carbonate rock that give rise to karst topography. Karst landscapes form when water erodes underground layers of carbonate rock, such as limestone and dolomite, enabling water to move great distances underground, disconnected from surface topology. The dissolution process can create sinkholes, caving, and sinking streams. These features present serious risks to surface structures and can create new, unmanageable paths for water carrying pollutants from sources such as septic systems, agricultural runoff, and soil disturbances to enter groundwater supplies.[9] As a result, development in carbonate rock areas must be effectively managed to mitigate these potential risks.

LAND USE

While New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the U.S., development within the Highlands Region ranges from rural towns to urban centers. The region includes 88 municipalities across portions of seven counties: Bergen, Hunterdon, Morris, Passaic, Somerset, Sussex, and Warren.

Farming has been a foundational economic and cultural force in the region for centuries. Early farms were located in the region's low, fertile valleys and began primarily as subsistence operations. Over time, farming practices became more complex, driven in part by industrialization from the mid-19th to the early 20th century.

This industrialization was supported by another rich resource found in the Highlands Region: iron oxide deposits.

With readily available water and timber, ironworks became a key early industry in the region. The ironworks and lumber industries consequently sparked broader agricultural industrialization at the turn of the 20th century, with farmsteads adapting their crops toward dairy and seasonal produce to support a growing labor force. Post World War II, farming land then gave way to rapid suburbanization.

Today, agriculture remains an important cultural and economic driver in the Highlands Region, and many communities continue to prioritize the preservation of working farmland. The 2004 Highlands Act reinforces this goal by emphasizing

farmland preservation both as a means of sustaining agriculture as an industry and a key component of broader open space preservation efforts.

CLIMATE RISKS AND PLANNING

The climate-related impacts to the Highlands Region are primarily driven by higher temperatures which has cascading effects on the people and places that call the area home (Figure 2). By the end of the century, the average annual temperature is projected to rise 4 to 5 degrees Fahrenheit in the best case scenario where carbon emissions increase a moderate amount. Should high carbon emissions continue, the average annual temperature will increase 9 to 10 degrees Fahrenheit.[10]

Increased temperatures affect residents and visitors during heat waves with vulnerable populations experiencing more heat-related illnesses.[11] They also contribute to increased precipitation and more extreme storm events, causing more flash floods and riverine flooding.[12] Increased rainfall, coupled with the region's steep topography, will also increase the risk of landslides and sinkholes in areas where underlying layers of carbonate rock has dissolved. Communities across the region will experience more unsafe or flooded roadways, infrastructure damage, fallen trees, and a decline in water quality caused by stormwater runoff pollution, erosion, and sinking streams.[13]

As its primary responsibility is to protect the state's clean drinking water, the Highlands Council is especially concerned with climate risks that threaten water resources, including extreme precipitation events, prolonged drought, and damage to forested areas that play a significant role in water filtration.[14]

Climate change and rapid suburbanization are also intensifying habitat loss in New Jersey and the U.S. more broadly, contributing to declines in flora, fauna, and their habitats that affect communities in tangible ways. Habitat loss destabilizes agricultural and timber industries, increases the risk of water contamination, and increases human contact with animals and insects that carry disease.[15] It also increases habitat fragmentation, disrupting species migration patterns and long-term survival while increasing the risk of invasive species.[16]

Climate change also threatens the agriculture industry and in turn, local food supplies.[17] Increased temperatures will increase heat stress and drought impacts on crops, affecting their viability. Greater fluctuations in winter temperatures and fewer frost days also increase exposure to agricultural pests and diseases.[18]

The growing risk of wildfires further threatens air quality, and heavily forested areas like the Highlands Region are especially vulnerable to these impacts. Wildfires can release substantial amounts of air pollution and smoke that can be

FIGURE 2. Climate Change Impacts to the Highlands Region

HIGHER TEMPERATURES IMPACT HIGHLANDS REGION

PEOPLE

More days of extreme heat, contributing to greater health-related issues for people, particularly those in urbanized areas, living in structures with no air conditioning, working outdoors, or experiencing social vulnerability due to age, income, preexisting health conditions, and other social determinants of health.

Increased susceptibility to sinkholes in developed karst areas.

ECONOMIES

Reduced downtown shopping and eco- and agri-tourism visits on high-heat days.

Heat stress and drought effects on crops.

Fewer frost days resulting in higher exposure to agricultural pests and diseases.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Reduced water quality through over-heating of aquatic habitats.

Reduced water quantity through increased evaporation, more drought days, and greater statewide demand for freshwater, particularly from coastal areas subject to saltwater intrusion.

Heat stress and drought effects to natural vegetation and wildlife.

Source: Highlands Council. "Sustainability and Climate Adaption Planning: an Integrated Guide for Highlands Region Municipalities." 2024. www.nj.gov/njhighlands/resources/climate/guidance/highlands_climate.pdf

carried across large distances. New Jersey is especially vulnerable to forest fires and their effects because nearly half of all residents live within the wildland urban interface due to its dense development patterns.[19]

Communities can use intentional open space planning to create a positive loop: by protecting farmlands, forests, natural resources, and recreational areas from climate change, these same natural resources help strengthen a community's social, environmental, and economic resilience.

The Highlands Council takes a proactive approach to integrating climate resilience into its planning efforts and guidance:

1. In 2024, the Highlands Region, in collaboration with New Jersey Future and Sustainable Jersey, authored the Sustainability and Climate Adaptation Planning guide. The document helps Highlands municipalities incorporate Climate Change-Related Hazard Vulnerability Assessments into local planning efforts. It also outlines key strategies to reduce risks to people, infrastructure, and the environment, while encouraging alignment with the state's Natural and Working Lands Strategy, which sets targets for carbon sequestration.[20]
2. The Highlands Council's Economic Sustainability Plan (2022) recommends adapting to climate change impacts by encouraging businesses to pursue innovative technologies and research that support climate change mitigation strategies.
3. The Highlands Council is currently developing a Climate Action Plan to address current and anticipated impacts of climate change on regional resources.

The OSRP integrates climate resiliency into its parcel scoring analysis, described in Chapter 5. Parcels with high wildfire or flood risk received higher preservation scores, helping reduce the potential risk to people or buildings that could result if the parcels were developed.

Land preservation plays a vital role in strengthening the state's overall climate resilience. Preserved lands can reduce air pollution and filter water, increase biodiversity, sequester and store carbon, and provide recreational opportunities that support people's wellbeing.[21] Other state-level efforts have similarly identified strong public support for existing carbon sequestration-focused projects, including reforestation or forest preservation, as nature-based approaches to improving climate resilience.[22] The Highlands Council's role in protecting drinking water resources for New Jersey uniquely positions them to encourage investment in nature-based climate action through land preservation.

For more information on broader effects of climate change in New Jersey, visit Climate Change Research Gaps in New Jersey (NJDEP).

Demographic and Socioeconomic Context

The Highlands Region has a population of 830,577 residents, the majority of whom identify as white (68.2%). Compared with statewide demographics, the region has a smaller percentage of Black residents (3.4% compared with 12.5% statewide) and a slightly smaller percentage of Asian residents (9.3% compared with 10.8% statewide).[23] Approximately 23% of the region's population lives in OBCs.

The median household income in the Highlands Region is $125,496, slightly higher than the state average of $110,099. The average household size is 2.55, compared with 2.58 statewide, and the median age of residents in the region is 44.6, compared to 43.5 statewide.[24]

INDIGENOUS HISTORY IN THE HIGHLANDS

There are three state-recognized tribes within New Jersey: the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Tribal Nation, the Powhatan Renape Nation, and the Ramapough Lenape Nation. These tribes are descendants of the original stewards of the lands that constitute what is now known as New Jersey, as well as northern areas of current Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New York.[25]

Colonization, displacement, treaty violations, and other racist practices and policies have had lasting impacts on the sovereignty and the overall wellbeing of Tribal communities throughout the Americas. In New Jersey, Indigenous communities have also been disproportionately impacted by environmental pollutants and other stressors, a topic further explored in the Environmental Justice section.

Despite generations of systemic marginalization and violence, Tribal history and culture in New Jersey remain living and evolving. The Highlands Council recognizes the importance of preserving sacred and archaeological sites and landmarks connected to the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape, the Powhatan Renape, and the Ramapough Lenape nations for their future generations and for the preservation of the natural environment.

As the need for climate mitigation and resilience strategies grows, so does the importance of incorporating Indigenous Knowledge and Traditional Ecological Knowledge—developed through generations of living in relationship with the land. Government agencies have significant opportunities to incorporate Indigenous knowledge and recognize Tribal communities as key partners whose expertise is invaluable to achieve wider sustainability goals.

Ceremonial Stone Landscapes

According to Michaeline Picaro Mann, a member and knowledge bearer for the Turtle Clan of the Ramapough Lenape Nation, there are thousands of above ground artifacts throughout Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut. In the Highlands Region, important cultural landmarks include Ceremonial Stone Landscapes (CSLs). These sites are "walls and rock piles of unusual construction" (definition attributed to Michaeline Mann) that were built as navigational markers and ceremonial spaces and hold spiritual value.[26] CSLs are often accompanied by Direction Trees, also known as Trail Marker Trees, which were intentionally shaped to support navigation.[27]

Importantly, CSLs are often overlooked or incorrectly attributed to European settlers, stripping them of their sacred value and limiting opportunities for preservation. In the 2007 report *We are Still Here!: The Tribal Saga of New Jersey's Nanticoke and Lenape Indians*, John R. Norwood notes that the public's lack of awareness of Tribal history is not accidental, but the result of Indigenous communities "being oppressed, mislabeled, and isolated" for economic and political reasons often rooted in racism and the dominance of white institutions.[28]

This disregard for and ignorance of Tribal history has contributed to the destruction of CSLs. Damage can include rearranging stones, graffiti, littering, or even actions that may appear harmless such as taking photographs. Tribal communities view stone as "a vehicle for receiving and transmitting prayer," and understand each stone within a CSL as having been placed with "sacred intention."[29] As a result, even photographing ceremonial stones may disrupt the "continuity of prayers" cultivated for generations.[30]

RINGWOOD MINES SUPERFUND SITE

An example of a former industrial area in the Highlands Region that continues to present environmental and public health challenges is the Ringwood Mines Superfund Site. The site's history is complex, involving overlapping land ownership, multiple rounds of cleanup efforts, and ongoing disagreements about the safety of the land today.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the Ringwood Mines/Landfill ("Ringwood Mines") Superfund site is a 500-acre area in the Borough of Ringwood in Passaic County. The area has experienced cumulative and compounding impacts from multiple sources of contamination, and in 1983, the federal government added the site to the National Priorities List as a Superfund site.[31] Superfund sites are areas contaminated to a degree where they pose a threat to public health and the environment, as defined in the 1980 Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA).[32]

The contamination has affected the health and wellbeing of residents living near the site, including the 50 homes inhabited by members of the Turtle Clan of the Ramapough Lenape Nation, who have lived in and stewarded the wooded areas around Ringwood for generations.

A 2020 study by the National Institutes of Health found that citizens of Indigenous nations in New Jersey were 13.84 times more likely to face potential exposure to Superfund sites than non-Indigenous residents living in the same borough. The study also identified elevated rates of bronchitis, asthma, and anemia were also present among members of the Turtle Clan.[33]

Turtle Clan Chief, Vincent Mann, has advocated for the EPA to support the relocation of Turtle Clan residents. For more information on the living history of the Ramapough Nation's clans, see the section Indigenous History in the Highlands.

Note: the description of this site may not capture all nuances and interested parties, because it is a truncated account meant to stay within the scope of the Highlands Region OSRP. It is recommended that readers refer to the cited sources, especially those written in partnership or directly from members of the Ramapough Nation as the affected community.[34]

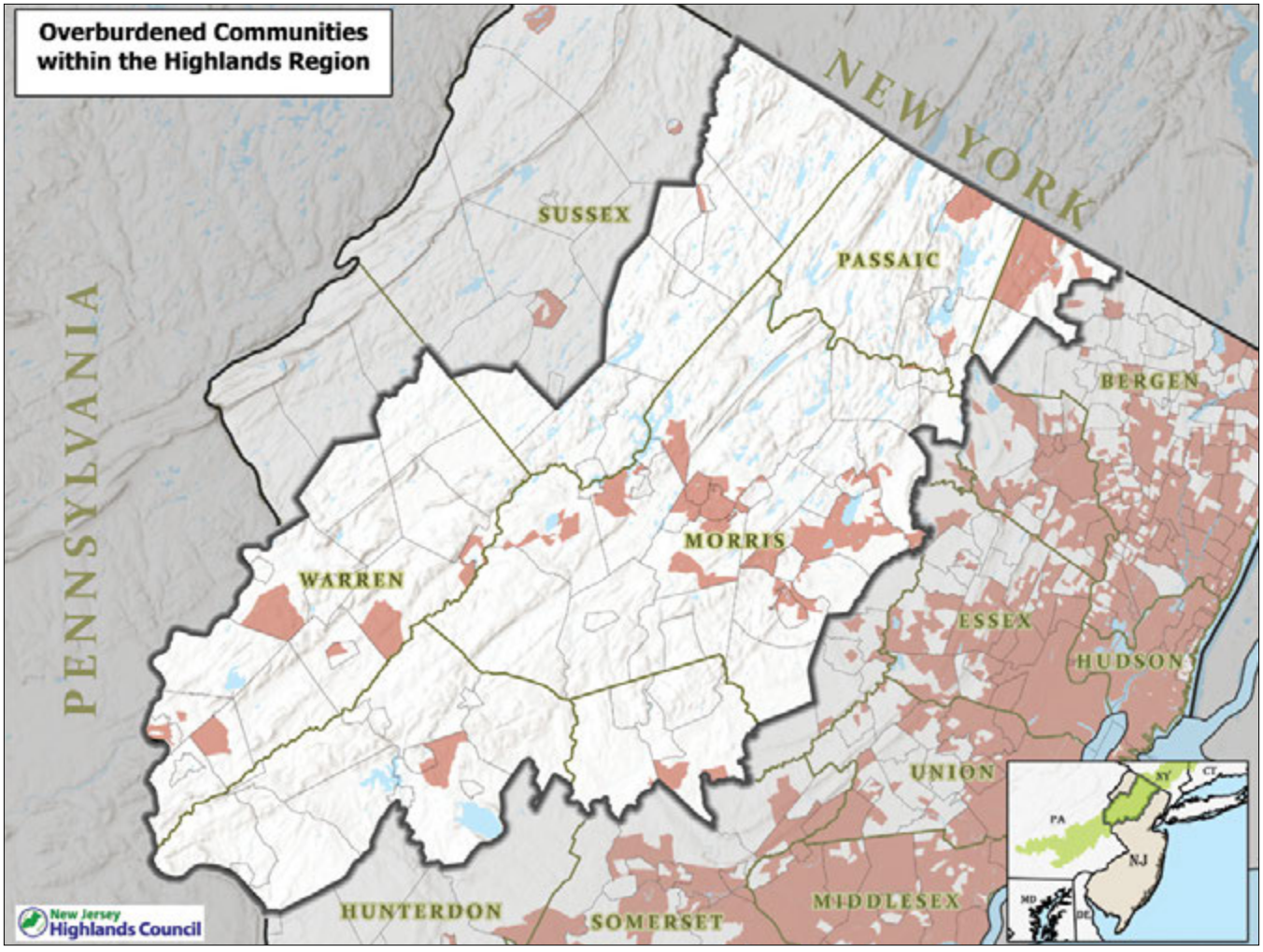
To protect these sacred sites, members of the Ramapough Lenape Nation, the Powhatan Renape Nation, and the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Nation have partnered with the State of New Jersey to recognize CSLs as archaeological resources to be documented and protected. The 2025 *New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan* sets the tone for local and regional government actions around these cultural resources by promoting "unity by all levels of government for the preservation and rehabilitation" of historic landmarks and areas, including CSLs.[35]

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

With New Jersey's history of industrialization, several communities across the state experience elevated pollution and contamination from former industrial sites that have not been fully remediated. Residents living in or near these sites —many of whom identify as minorities or are low-income— consequently experience disproportionately negative impacts from environmental contamination.

Environmental justice is the idea that all individuals, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or ability, have the right to be treated fairly and are meaningfully involved in decisions that affect their communities and environments. The State of New Jersey upholds environmental justice principles, and in 2020 then-Governor Phil Murphy signed landmark environmental justice legislation into law to prioritize the wellbeing of marginalized residents and Overburdened Communities (OBCs).[36] The location of OBCs in the Highlands Region as of 2022 are mapped below.

The Highlands Council prioritizes equitable distribution of land preservation for open space and recreation so that all communities, especially OBCs, can benefit from the health benefits of open space. By identifying preservation opportunities within OBCs, the Highlands Region can advance equitable outcomes for the most underserved communities while strengthening the region's economy, public health, and environmental resilience.



SPANISH-SPEAKING AND LATINO RESIDENTS IN THE HIGHLANDS

Hispanic and Latino communities are the second-largest racial or ethnic group in New Jersey after white, non-Hispanic residents. Across the state, 22.5% of residents identify as Hispanic and/or Latino, compared with 54% who identify as white and not Hispanic or Latino. New Jersey has the eighth-highest percentage of residents identifying as Hispanic or Latino among all 50 states and ranks seventh in number of residents who speak Spanish at home (1.5 million residents, or 17.2% of the population).[37]

In the Highlands Region, the communities with the highest percentages of residents identifying as Hispanic and/or Latino are the Town of Dover—where 14,174 of 18,563 residents (76.4%) identify as Hispanic and/or Latino—and the Borough of Wharton where 3,754 of 7,318 residents (51.3%) identify as Hispanic and/or Latino.[38]

Many Hispanic and Latino communities have lived in New Jersey for generations. Large waves of Latin American and Caribbean immigrants arrived during the early and mid-20th century, some of whom were political refugees during the Cold War. Today, many of these communities continue to experience disparities tied to structural inequality, racism, and discrimination related to immigration status.[39]

A 2024 study of Latino communities across five states, including New Jersey, found consistently higher rates of poverty, uninsured individuals, and overcrowded housing when compared to white communities.[40] A 2022 Harvard study found that predominantly Latino ZIP codes experienced levels of fine particulate air pollution up to 14% higher than predominantly white areas.[41] In addition, a 2021 report from TPL found that among the 100 most populous U.S, cities, disparities in park access were greatest between white neighborhoods and predominantly Hispanic and Latino neighborhoods, with Hispanic and Latino neighborhoods having access to 54% less park acreage per person.[42]

In 2019, the New Jersey Historical Commission published a report aimed in part to build new partnerships with Hispanic and Latino communities for future program development and increase participation in the historical preservation process. The report identified opportunities such as integrating more Hispanic and Latino history into school curricula, documenting oral histories, and preserving monuments and landmarks to diversify wider historic and cultural preservation opportunities.[43]

The importance of oral history is mirrored in the Latino New Jersey History Project from the Rutgers Latino Studies Research Initiative with support by the New Jersey Historical Commission. The project aims to document and proliferate the histories of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Peruvian, Dominican, and other Latino communities through oral histories, archival documents, newspapers, census data, maps, and photographs. The Newark Public Library, the New Jersey Council for the



Stream Cleanup at Bowers Brook at Trinity United Methodist Church, Hackettstown, Warren County (Peace NJ)

Humanities, and the Friends of the New Jersey Hispanic Research & Information Center also came together to document and maintain the oral history of Hispanic and Latino communities in New Jersey.

Intentional Engagement of Spanish-speaking residents

In New Jersey, 17.2% of residents speak Spanish at home.[44] To expand participation in OSRP planning efforts, TWENTYTWENTY coordinated with PeaceNJ to develop outreach strategies for Spanish-speaking communities in the Highlands Region. PeaceNJ assisted with the translation and distribution of the public outdoor recreation survey, developed to identify patterns and trends in open space use, user needs and preferences, and public interest in acquiring and preserving open space for natural resource protection and outdoor use.

All Spanish-speaking survey respondents indicated that acquiring and preserving open space in the Highlands Region for natural resource protection was important, with more than two-thirds saying it was extremely important. Key findings from Spanish-speaking respondents included:

- Trail use (50%), picnicking (43%), and fishing (36%) were the most common outdoor recreation activities among respondents. In addition, 56% said they would like to try bird or wildlife watching in the future.
- Respondents expressed interest in additional picnic areas, walking and off-road bike trails, and more amenities such as restrooms, water fountains, and grilling areas.
- Respondents identified barriers to outdoor recreation that included not knowing where to go, lack of private or access to public transportation, lack of facilities, and insufficient multilingual signage.

In 2022, PeaceNJ, with the support of the Musconetcong Watershed Association and River Network, also conducted a Hackettstown Hispanic Survey about Outdoor Recreation. Many participants expressed concerns about the mental health of children in their households, and there was consensus that spending more time outdoors benefits everyone's mental and physical health. In that survey, 70% of participants said they wanted to walk, hike, or garden more and 66% wanted to fish more often.

Respondents also identified barriers to participating in outdoor activities, including lack of information about available recreation options (83%), concerns about cost of registration or equipment (80%), language accessibility challenges for adults (65%), and lack of transportation for young people (61%).

Land preservation efforts should consider the importance of clear multilingual signage that explains not only prohibited activities, but also the types of activities allowed on preserved properties. Creating informational videos in Spanish about preserved properties and permitted uses could further improve accessibility and encourage broader community use of these spaces.

Recreation, Farmland, and Conservation in the Highlands Region

OUTDOOR RECREATION

The Highlands Region is rich with outdoor recreation opportunities, including hiking, fishing, hunting, camping, birdwatching, and cycling. According to the OSRP survey, the most popular outdoor activities in the region are walking, hiking, and trail running; birding and wildlife viewing; picnicking and general recreation; swimming; and participating in nature education programs (Appendix A).

The Highlands Region OSRP provides a framework to guide the protection of recreational resources, including parks, trails, and open space. For the purposes of this study, the Highlands Council focused on outdoor recreation activities that take place in natural environments, such as hiking, mountain biking, fishing, and hunting.[45]

The natural resources and outdoor recreation opportunities in the Highlands Region provide many benefits to residents and visitors alike. Research from TPL shows that:

1. Increased access to outdoor recreation is linked to reduced anxiety and depression as well as improved maternal health outcomes.[46] It also promotes physical activity, which can reduce the severity and prevalence of chronic health conditions like cardiovascular disease, obesity, and asthma.[47]
2. Investments in parks and open space also catalyze civic engagement. TPL's *Common Ground Framework* notes that when parks are paired with intentional, equitable programming and community engagement, they can support socially cohesive and civically invested communities.[48] This is especially important at a time when division and polarization are leading to increased

instances and more acute cases of loneliness, anxiety, and depression[49] as well as declining trust in public institutions.[50]

3. Investments in parks and open space also generate economic benefits to individuals and communities. Parks, trails, and open space provide recreational value, increase nearby residential property values, and improve quality of life, which in turn helps attract and retain businesses.[51]

Visitors and residents alike value the recreational importance of the natural areas in the Highlands Region. According to the OSRP survey, 30% of respondents indicated they would travel 1.5 to 2 hours to access recreational opportunities in the region and another 35% said they would travel at least one hour. Residents also regularly travel throughout the region to swim, boat, and fish in its many lakes and streams; bike and walk on trail networks; and visit parks across the Highlands. For more information on the OSRP survey results, see Chapter 2. Public Outreach and Stakeholder Engagement.

The Highlands Council prioritizes increasing access to parks, trails, and open space to ensure all residents experience the benefits that nature provides. As part of this study, TPL conducted a Recreation Asset Inventory and Level of Service Analysis to better understand access challenges across the region; for more information, please see Chapter 5.

DISC GOLF IN THE HIGHLANDS REGION

Disc golf (or frisbee golf) is an increasingly popular outdoor recreation activity in the Highlands Region due to its low barriers to entry and minimal environmental footprint. There are 16 courses throughout the region, with over 3,000 players playing 32,800 hours of disc golf in 2025. Data from the disc golf app UDisc indicates that players visit the Highlands Region from Pennsylvania, New York, and Delaware, as well as from countries including Canada, Norway, and Germany.

Source: UDisc



Greenwood Lake, West Milford Township, Passaic County (NJ Farm Bureau)

FARMLAND PRESERVATION

Farmland preservation plays a key role in achieving open space preservation goals in the Highlands Region.

With a thriving agricultural industry that helps sustain the region, the Highlands Council recognizes the importance of preserving working lands as a standalone priority. The Highlands Council encourages land management and land use policies that protect agricultural resources and sustain the long-term viability of farming in the region.[52] The Highlands Region has a higher concentration of agricultural land use (11.6%) compared to Northern New Jersey overall (10.4%) and the state as a whole (9.5%).[53]

These objectives align with the State of New Jersey, whose legislature declared through the 2004 Highlands Act that agricultural lands within the Highlands Region are vital to the "economy, welfare, and culture" of the state. In 2024, NJDEP also published "A Strategy to Advance Carbon Sequestration on New Jersey's Natural and Working Lands," which encourages stewardship of these lands as a way to reduce climate change impacts.[54] For example, the strategy recommends farmers use compost and cover crops to absorb and store carbon. Working lands can support agricultural production while also mitigating the adverse effects of climate change.

The Highlands Council explicitly identifies agricultural land preservation in its open space preservation goals. Preserving farmland helps protect permeable surfaces required for groundwater retention and flood mitigation, limits urban sprawl, and reduces soil erosion. Farmland preservation can also increase opportunities for outdoor recreation through agrotourism.

Members of the OSRP Open Space and Agriculture Steering Committee encouraged the protection of contiguous agricultural lands where possible. Preserving adjacent farmland helps maintain the scenic vistas that are essential to the character of the Highlands Region while creating economies of scale for agrotourism opportunities, such as the 579 Trail in Hunterdon County.[55]

Despite the many benefits of agriculture, farmland is increasingly threatened by residential and commercial development pressure. According to the 2020 State of the States report by American Farmland Trust, New Jersey is the third most threatened state in the U.S. for agricultural land at risk of being "paved over, fragmented, or converted



Van Nest-Hoff-Vannatta Farmstead, Harmony Township, Warren County (Highlands Council)

to uses that compromise agriculture".[56] The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) found that the state has lost an average of 6,000 acres of farmland annually since 1997 because of population growth and associated development pressure.[57] Within the Highlands Region specifically, 10,360 acres of farmland were lost between 2002 and 2020. However, nearly 26,300 acres of farmland were also preserved from 2005 to 2024.[58]

Encouragingly, the American Farmland Trust also ranked New Jersey as the state most responsive to agricultural loss in its 2020 Agricultural Land Protection Scorecard.[59] To ensure that residents continue to benefit from the Highlands Region's agricultural lands and that farming remains economically viable, the Highlands Council maintains a strong commitment to farmland preservation.

OPEN SPACE CONSERVATION

There are 333,666 preserved acres in the Highlands Region, covering 39% of the region's land area.[60] This expanse of open space is nationally significant—providing recreation opportunities and wildlife habitat, improves drinking water quality for millions of residents, and has historic and cultural importance for its place in American history.[61]

There are statewide efforts underway to increase land protection in response to development pressure and the potential for functional build-out across New Jersey. The "50x50" campaign, coordinated by The Nature Conservancy, provides a framework for preserving 50% of the state's best remaining lands by 2050. Priority conservation areas are identified in Conservation Blueprint, which informed the OSRP map analysis for the Highlands Region (see Chapter 5). To reach the 50x50 goal, New Jersey needs to conserve at least 25,000 acres per year, compared to the current rate of 5,000 acres annually.[62] Additional coordination and resources are needed to continue New Jersey's legacy of natural resource protection.

The OSRP survey also indicates strong public support for preserving open space in the Highlands Region to protect natural resources, including forests, meadows, waterways, wetlands, and agricultural land. Ninety-three percent of respondents said it was extremely important to acquire and preserve open space for natural resource protection, compared with 65% who said it was extremely important to preserve open space for active recreation.

93%

of respondents stated it was extremely important to acquire and preserve open space in the region for natural resource protection, compared to 65% of residents stating it was extremely important to preserve open space for active recreation.

Open space preservation is an essential tool for protecting land from development, safeguarding water supplies and other natural resources, and expanding outdoor recreational opportunities. It also provides measurable economic value, from reducing stormwater management costs and air pollution, to absorbing greenhouse gases, to providing critical habitat to the Highlands Region's flora and fauna.

Land conservation can also help address some of the climate risks facing the Highlands Region. The 2024 TPL report *The Power of Land Conservation to Address the Climate Crisis* notes conservation projects can reduce air pollution and filter water, increase biodiversity, sequester and store carbon, and provide recreational opportunities, that support mental and physical wellbeing.[63] Land conservation also promotes smart growth and development while preserving crucial pathways for precipitation to filter through the soil and ultimately replenish groundwater stores.

As more communities face wildlife and habitat loss, forest fragmentation, and groundwater depletion, the Highlands Council continues to emphasize the importance of land preservation as a tool to address these issues.

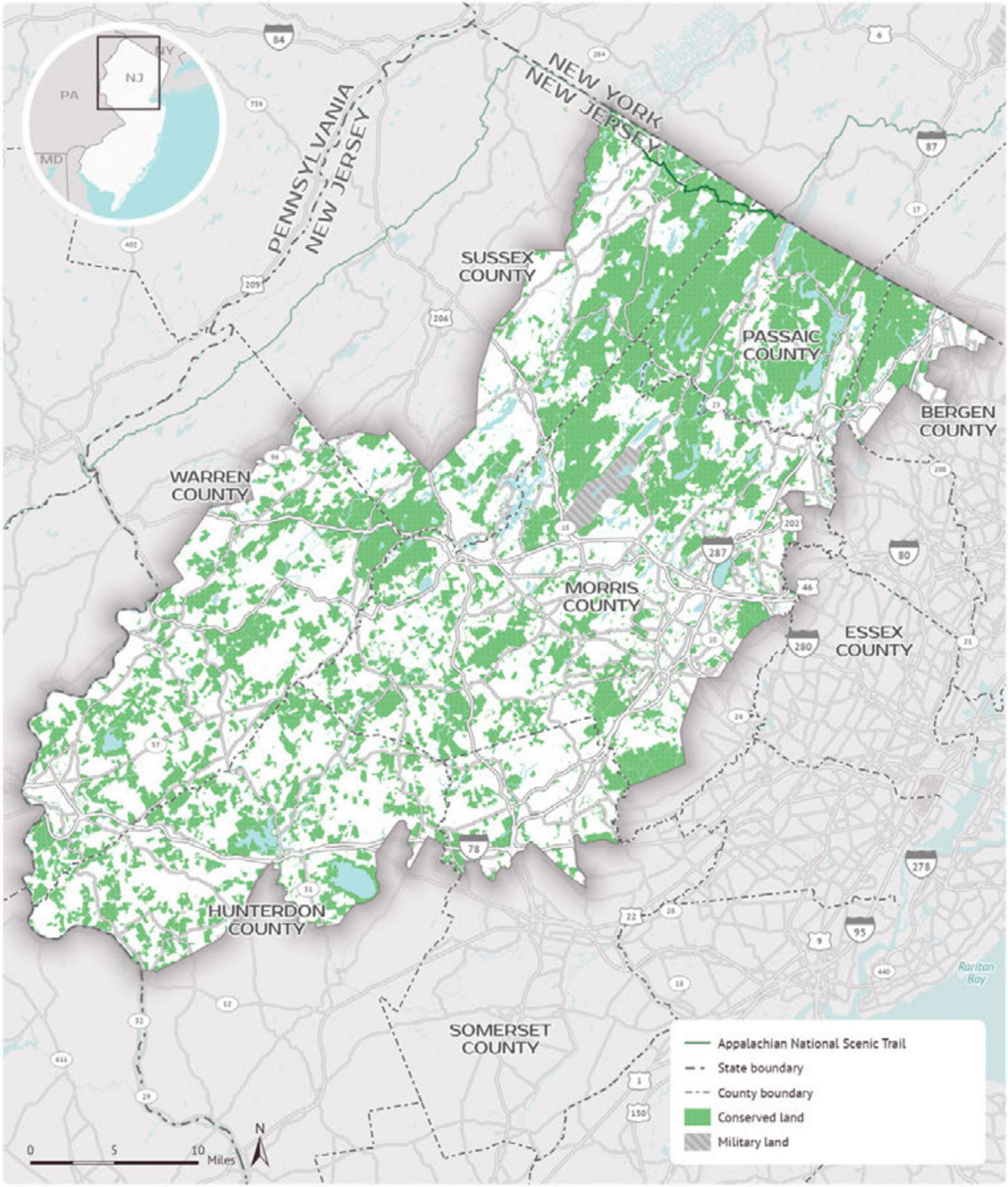
Status of Land Preservation and Recommendations from the Highlands Council

Highlands Region Land Preservation Status Reports document the acreage of preserved land, developed land, and land that does not fit into either category. The most recent report, published in 2022, and documenting land preservation

THE ROLE OF THE HIGHLANDS COUNCIL IN LAND PRESERVATION

The Highlands Council operates two land preservation programs: The Highlands Open Space Partnership Funding Program and Highlands Development Credit Purchase Program. Both are designed to increase protection of the Highlands Region's resources while advancing landowner equity priorities through acquisition or deed restriction of land throughout the region. Parcels of any size qualify, and the programs will consider applications for land that is forested, agricultural, and/or mixed use. The programs are administered under the provisions of N.J.A.C. 7:70, Highlands Open Space Partnership Funding and Highlands Development Credit Purchase Program.

Source: 2022 Highlands Region Land Preservation Status Report.



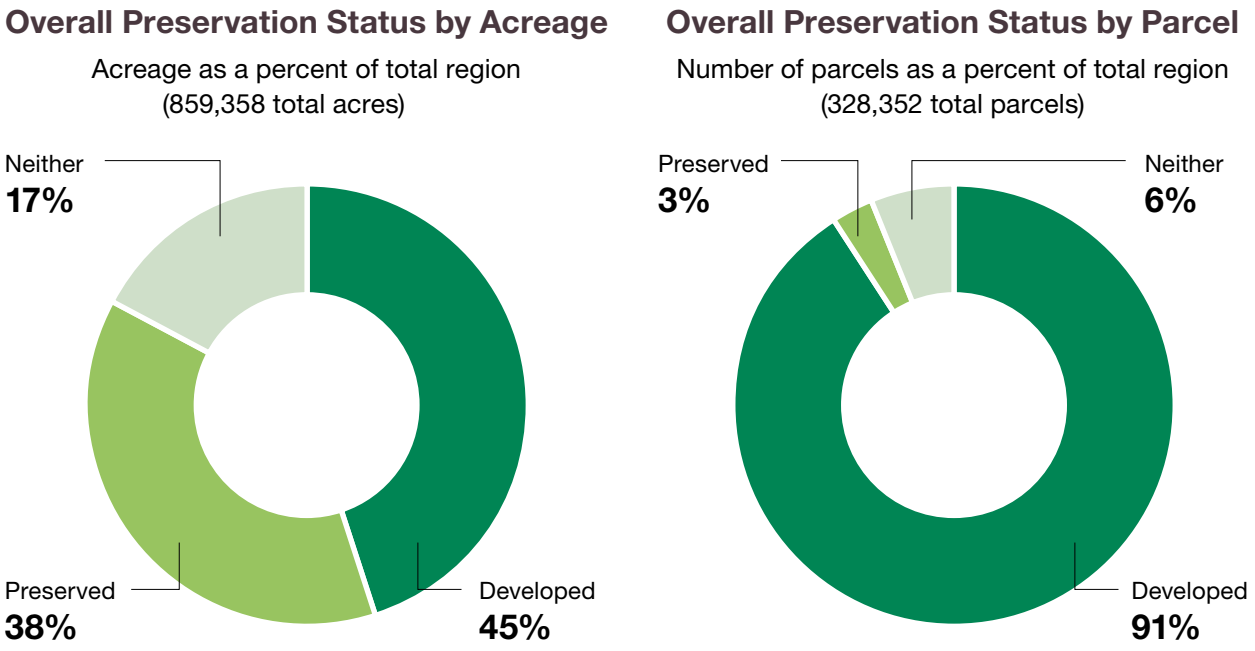
Conserved Land

HIGHLANDS REGION OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLAN

July 2, 2026. Copyright © Trust for Public Land. Trust for Public Land and Trust for Public Land logo are federally registered marks of Trust for Public Land. Information on this map is provided for purposes of discussion and visualization only. www.tpl.org

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FIGURE 3. Preservation status of Parcels in the Highlands Region (2022).



Source: Highlands Region Council. 2022 Highlands Region Land Preservation Status Report. *December 2022.*

status through December of 2021, found that out of the approximately 859,000 acres of land within the region, 45% is developed, 38% is preserved, and 17% does not fall into either category (Figure 3).[64]

From 2008 through 2021, more than 66,000 acres of preserved land were added. However, only 52% of the Preservation Area is permanently preserved, while 15% is neither preserved nor developed. Agricultural land preservation represents the single largest increase in total preserved acreage in the region, adding 13,500 acres since 2010. State preservation efforts are the second-largest contributor, accounting for 11,000 acres since 2010.

The Highlands Council aims for an equitable distribution of preserved land for both recreational and ecological benefits. At the time of publication, 29 municipalities contained at least a portion of a census block that met the criteria for an OBC. In accordance with the 2020 New Jersey Environmental Justice Law, limited access to high-quality recreational and open space is considered an environmental and public health stressor. The Highlands Council continues to track park and open space inequities to inform planning efforts.

Importantly, there are no consistent, stable funding sources dedicated to land preservation in the Highlands Region to support implementation of the open space preservation goals identified in the RMP and OSRP. Potential funding sources include the Corporate Business Tax (CBT), Regional Green House Gas Initiative (RGGI), Natural Resource Damage Claims (NRDC), and the New Jersey Infrastructure Bank (I-Bank). There have been repeated legislative efforts to establish a permanent funding source, but none have been successful. Most recently, Bill A3749 was introduced during the 2026–27 legislative session which would allocate $7.5 million annually from constitutionally dedicated CBT revenue for the preservation of land in the Highlands Region.[65]

A permanent funding source is essential to helping the Highlands Council fulfill its mission. Without adequate funding, the Highlands Council is unable to take full advantage of federal matching programs. Despite these challenges, the Highlands Council is committed to continuing land preservation efforts.

Regional Planning Context

The Highlands Council values the planning initiatives and projects undertaken by stakeholders and leaders across the region to advance open space conservation, passive recreation, and farmland preservation.

The Highlands Region OSRP builds on these efforts. In developing the plan, the authors reviewed more than 40 relevant open space and recreation plans, land use plans, farmland preservation plans, geospatial tools, and guidebooks. These documents represent the vision, values, and goals of the boroughs, towns, counties, and regional planning agencies located within or adjacent to the Highlands Region. Research and reports from the State of New Jersey were also reviewed to ensure alignment with state priorities.

The review ensures a truly regional approach to planning by incorporating diverse local preferences and values for open space protection, outdoor recreation, and agricultural preservation. Alignment with state and national priorities can also help communities access funding to implement local planning efforts.

The planning review is available as Appendix B.

STATE, REGIONAL, AND LOCAL ALIGNMENT

At the state level, the New Jersey State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), *Outside, Together!*, focuses on three key approaches that strongly align with the Highlands OSRP strategy:

- the importance of prioritizing and locating new recreational spaces, including an equitable distribution of recreational opportunities for all New Jerseyans with a focus on equity and environmental justice;
- enhancing climate resilience through land acquisition; and
- embracing the role of technology in conservation and outdoor recreation.

Additionally, the OSRP was informed by the state-level Conservation Blueprint and the 2024 Extreme Heat Resilience Action Plan.[66] The Conservation Blueprint is a data-driven online mapping tool developed through a partnership among The Nature Conservancy, Rowan University, and the New Jersey Conservation Foundation that helps identify priority areas for agriculture, ecology, and water quality while meeting community green space needs.[67]

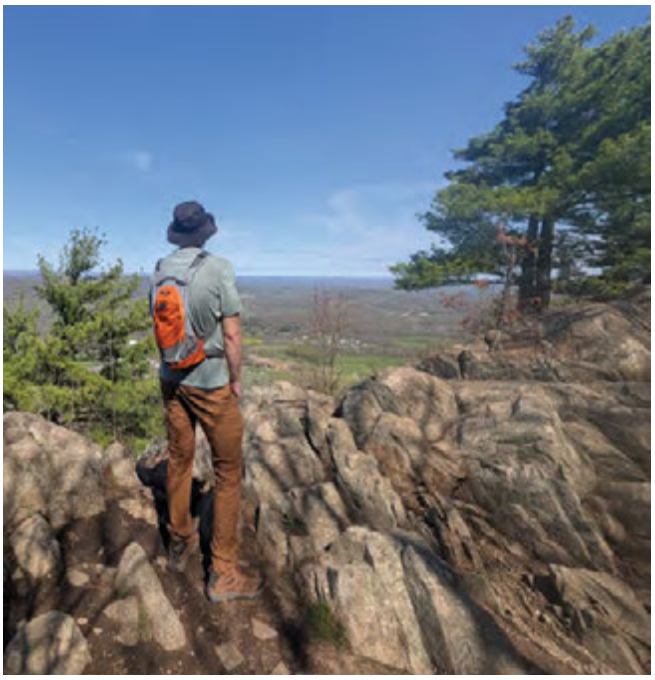
The OSRP adopted a similar approach by reviewing its goals and tailoring the analyses to the specific needs of the Highlands Region. Representatives from the Open Space and Farmland Subcommittee helped guide this effort by identifying critical data sources for the OSRP planning process.

The Highlands Region OSRP is intended to increase access to outdoor recreation, especially for historically disadvantaged communities and others with limited accessibility. The OSRP also helps prioritize investment in open space by integrating climate risk and stakeholder feedback into the parcel scoring analysis (see Chapter 5). The Highlands Council leveraged innovative technology approaches to better understand access and risk, proposing a value-centric land acquisition strategy that integrates geospatial analysis and stakeholder engagement.

To ground the OSRP in the current planning context, TPL reviewed and summarized local and regional planning documents that informed the OSRP approach (Appendix B). Several themes emerged from these plans, including:

- protecting areas of historical and cultural significance;
- addressing park and open space inequities;
- improving water quality, sources of safe drinking water, and water-based recreation;
- addressing forest fragmentation;
- preserving agricultural land; and
- balancing preservation needs with affordable housing.

The open space and recreation plans in the region also recognize the importance of preserving areas of historical and cultural significance. Some plans, like the 2022 Vernon Township Open Space and Recreation Plan, highlight efforts



Stairway to Heaven Trail, Vernon Township, Sussex County (Highlands Council)

to protect both agricultural and Indigenous history through the Vernon Township Historical Society.[68] Other plans, such as the 2025 Sparta Township Open Space and Recreation Plan, focus on preserving the "small town feel" present throughout the region, including architectural character of historic downtowns and residential areas, scenic views, and working farmlands.[69]

When addressing park and open space inequities, most plans focus on ensuring that parks are welcoming and functional for people of all ages and sometimes specify that this applies to people of all abilities.

Communities also consistently plan for the maintenance of water quality and groundwater recharge areas for drinking water, with some calling for maintaining riparian corridors and continuous greenbelts along streams to buffer for natural habitats and establish "blue trails" for canoeing and kayaking.

The reviewed farmland and open space preservation plans reference the importance of forestland preservation and promoting practices that prevent fragmentation. Efforts for farmland preservation and open space conservation and recreation are heavily intertwined within the Highlands Region. Agricultural communities recognize that broader open space and recreation goals cannot be achieved without preserving farmland and coordinating with agencies involved in farmland preservation. This sentiment is highlighted in all open space and recreation plans reviewed.



Apshawa Preserve, West Milford Township, Passaic County (Highlands Council)

Affordable housing plays a role in the OSRP as it is central to land acquisition discussions in New Jersey. Under the New Jersey Supreme Court's Mount Laurel decisions, every municipality in the state must set aside land for its "fair share" of regional affordable housing needs.[70] In Highlands Region municipalities, affordable housing development must also align with the policies and goals of the Highlands Act and the Highlands RMP.

The Highlands Region OSRP prioritizes open space protection and agricultural preservation in environmentally sensitive areas while channeling growth toward areas better suited for development. Importantly, the OSRP aligns with the values of the Green Acres Program, which states that "funding should not be used to impede a municipality's ability or responsibility to meet its constitutional obligation to provide a fair share of affordable housing."[71] The New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan similarly recommends coordination among regional, county, and municipal land use plans and the statewide SCORP to encourage future development that balances housing needs with recreational open space.[72]

Several planning documents reviewed highlighted the ways communities use trail systems to better connect residents and visitors to downtowns, business districts, and commercial areas. Trails promote economic development and provide opportunities for ecotourism through interdisciplinary partnerships among municipalities, museums and historic sites, recreation advocates, chambers of commerce, and members of business and commercial districts. (For more information about the economic benefits of parks, trails, and open space, see the Economics of Conservation and Preservation section below.)

Trail connectivity also emerged as a priority during the OSRP stakeholder engagement process (see Chapter 4). In response, the Highlands Council will promote the interconnectivity of trails and commercial areas in communities as a key strategy going forward. The strategies and methodologies outlined in the OSRP can also serve as a resource for communities seeking to strengthen walkability, connectivity, and active transportation options through trails.

NOTABLE PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES

The following land use, geospatial, and planning projects are currently underway or have recently been completed in or adjacent to the Highlands Region. These efforts will be important to consider when evaluating future land preservation opportunities:

Planning Projects

- The New Jersey Trails Playbook, led by NJDEP, will compile statewide trail planning documents and resources to support statewide trail planning.[73]
- The New Jersey Conservation Blueprint, developed by The Nature Conservancy, Rowan University and the New Jersey Conservation Foundation is a vector-based tool that aggregates the Conservation Blueprint raster data into individual parcels.
- The State Land Acquisition Boundary Project, led by the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife, will develop a standardized approach for acquiring land needed to protect or restore key wildlife corridors (as of the writing of this document, this project is not yet published online).
- The Morris Canal Greenway Plan (2018), led by the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority, identifies a continuous pedestrian and bicycle route following a 102-mile path of the historic Morris Canal across six counties.[74]

Legislation

- Bill S699/A682 was recently signed into law to protect privately-owned woodlands from development. The legislation creates a state-managed fund through the State Agriculture Development Committee to acquire development easements on privately-owned forested land.[75]

Recreation Projects

- The Highlands Rail Trail, led by Passaic County, is a two-mile pedestrian and bicycle greenway in Passaic County. Phase I was completed in September of 2025.[76]

Economics of Conservation and Preservation

Land protection, outdoor recreation, and agricultural preservation all play important roles in supporting economic wellbeing. Conserving lands rich in biodiversity and natural resources helps ensure that the benefits that nature provides—ecosystem services—can be experienced by residents and visitors of the Highlands Region.

Natural areas provide ecosystem services that enhance human wellbeing and environmental quality. For example, forested areas absorb and store carbon dioxide, reducing emissions and mitigating the effects of climate change. A robust tree canopy also supports public and environmental health. Urban tree canopy in the U.S. alone provides an estimated $18.3 billion in annual benefits through air and water pollution removal, water protection, carbon storage, energy savings for buildings, heat reduction, and avoided stormwater runoff.[77]

Undeveloped lands also filter, absorb, and slow stormwater runoff and flood water, which reduces flooding impacts, replenishes groundwater, and improves water quality downstream.[78] Maintaining permeable surfaces like forests and vegetated areas reduce the need for costly grey infrastructure for stormwater.

Well-maintained parks, trails, and open space also improve nearby property values. Studies show that houses located near high-quality green spaces are more highly valued, benefiting both homeowners and communities through increased property tax revenue. A 2019 study found that the "park premium" from proximity to parks and open space ranged from 8% to 10% of a property's value.[79]

In addition, outdoor recreation and agritourism generate economic development benefits by creating opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship and expanding tourism offerings in the Highlands Region. In 2024, outdoor recreation generated $16.2 billion for New Jersey's economy, representing 1.9% of the state's total GDP, and supported 128,138 jobs earning $7.9 billion in salaries and wages.

According to the 2023–2027 SCORP for New Jersey, more than 83% of state residents consider outdoor recreation personally important to them and two-thirds report having a favorite park or outdoor space in the state that they visit. Outdoor recreation also attracts visitors from outside the region to destinations such as Lake Hopatcong, Ken Lockwood Gorge Wildlife Management Area, and Round Valley Reservoir.

In addition to the economic benefits of outdoor recreation, agricultural preservation supports economic vitality in the Highalnds Region. Farms provide employment and wages, generate economic value through their products and agrotourism, and contribute to food security. Farmers markets and programming are especially important drivers of tourism in the region, attracting visitors through farm visits, overnight stays, farm-to-table meals, and pick-your-own produce.

There is a growing interest among New Jersey residents in expanding access to agritourism opportunities. In the latest SCORP, residents noted that they want to see more farmers markets at parks across the state.[80] The Highlands Region is uniquely positioned to help meet that request, as its farmland helps define the culture and character of the region.



Chester Township, Morris County
(NJ Farm Bureau)

Chapter 4.

Goals for Open Space, Outdoor Recreation, and Farmland Preservation in the Highlands

After evaluating the planning context in the Highlands Region, identifying and engaging key stakeholders, and conducting a public survey, the Highlands Council and their planning partners worked with the Steering Committee and topic-specific subcommittee members to define land preservation goals for the OSRP.

These goals address the Highland Council's intent in developing the OSRP:

1. to better optimize the balance of conservation and development in the region,
2. to strengthen relationships with partners, and
3. to develop proactive strategies for land acquisition and management.

The goals address the need for sustained water quality, critical habitats, natural resource protection, recreation, climate resiliency, and agricultural industries. They also inform the parcel scoring analysis (Chapter 5) and the Acquisition and Funding Plan (Chapter 6).

This chapter describes the process used to develop the OSRP goals and summarizes the results.

METHODOLOGY

To develop the goals, the Highlands Council established two subcommittees: the Open Space and Farmland Subcommittee and the Outdoor Recreation Subcommittee.[81] These groups were comprised of stakeholders with extensive expertise in each topic area in New Jersey and provided guidance on the strengths and weaknesses of land protection in the region, strategies for proactive preservation, and the benefits the preservation provides.

The subcommittees met several times in 2025 to discuss the three distinct categories of land preservation:

1. open space conservation,
2. publicly accessible outdoor recreation, and
3. farmland preservation.

Discussions covered current priorities for preservation and outdoor recreation access in the Highlands Region and identified needs such as trail accessibility, preservation of scenic vistas, and habitat connectivity. Participants shared local initiatives, data sources, and best practices that informed the land protection framework via the parcel scoring analysis (see Chapter 5).

The Highlands Council compiled all identified goals and reviewed them for inclusion in the parcel scoring analysis. Some goals had recently mapped data, such as critical habitat, while others had decentralized data, or data that was not mapped consistently across the region, such as a project's potential to support economic growth.

Ultimately, goals were split into two approaches for evaluation:

1. Measurable, map-based evaluation: scores are based on an innovative GIS analysis for the Highlands Region; and
2. Subjective, qualitative evaluation: responses to these questions add nuance to numerical scores.

Measurable scores were quantified using clear metrics and map-based data, such as distance from existing preserved land. The methodology for this analysis is detailed in Chapter 5.

IMPLEMENTATION

One of the central goals of the Highlands Region OSRP is to support the acquisition of parcels that are crucial to reaching the regional, high-level open space goals identified in this document.

The three checklists on the following pages are intended to complement and build on the map-based parcel analysis describes in Chapter 5.

Subjective evaluation like these checklists can be informed by site visits, stakeholder engagement, or desktop research. It is intended to support land protection where benefits may not yet be consistently measured in a map format or that are otherwise difficult to quantify. To ensure these benefits remain part of the decision-making process, site-specific evaluation questions are organized as a checklist, with each framed as a binary "yes" or "no" question. A "yes" answer to an evaluation question awards one point, allowing site assessors to compare how well potential sites align with OSRP goals.

These checklists are also helpful for a range of contexts, including:

- Selecting and comparing parcels and decision-making support.
- Identifying benefits for advocacy and/or alignment with funding opportunities.
- Informing decision-makers in a measurement and evaluation.
- Communicating the comprehensive benefits of a project to funders and public audiences through engagement processes.

HOW TO USE

1. First, refer to the Highlands Council Resource Explorer (REX) interactive map to provide context for the community benefits of the identified parcel(s).
2. Use the tear out sheets on subsequent pages to conduct a qualitative analysis, complimentary to the data found in the REX interactive map.
3. Refer to Chapter 6 of the OSRP (Acquisition and Funding for the Highlands Region) for funding opportunity resources.
4. Reach out to staff at the Highlands Council with any follow-up related to your project or further guidance on how to use this document.



High Bridge Grounds for Art, TISCO Green Acres property. High Bridge Borough, Hunterdon County (Highlands Council)

Open Space Conservation Goals

Measurable Goals

_____ Protect parcels adjacent to existing preserved lands to decrease fragmentation of habitat, wildlife areas, and open space.

_____ Conserve Bird Areas and Migratory Routes, Critical Habitat, Vernal Pools, Wildlife Corridors, Natural Heritage Priority Sites, Areas in Special Environmental Zones, and Forested areas to protect habitat and water quality in the Highlands region.

_____ Conserve Groundwater Recharge Areas, Surface Water Buffers, Wellhead Protection Areas, and Karst to protect water quality in the Highlands region.

_____ Conserve parcels with highest wildfire risk to mitigate climate risk in the Highlands Region (facilitates forest management to reduce risk to people and property).

_____ Conserve parcels in Flood Zones to mitigate climate risk in the Highlands Region (minimize potential property damage, maintaining pervious surfaces in high-flood-risk areas).

_____ Conserve parcels that have been identified as high value environmental and natural resources and at-risk of development.

- ___ Protect lands that don't have protection in place.
- ___ Balance development with sensitive resources.

Site-specific Evaluation Questions

PLANNING CONSISTENCY:

_____ Would conservation of this property be consistent with other local, county, or state planning documents and policies?

_____ Is the parcel identified as a priority for preservation in existing planning documents?

LONG-TERM PLANNING:

_____ Is there an ability to maintain the area? (e.g. existing 'Friends of' group, strong local political will, a proposed maintenance plan in place)

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Outdoor Recreation Goals

Measurable Goals

_____ Conserve land with opportunity for trail continuity (including short distances to existing trails) to increase outdoor recreation access and to connect recreational assets with multi-modal transportation options, opportunities, and/or access.

_____ Protect parcels adjacent to publicly accessible recreational waters to expand water-based outdoor recreation access.

_____ Protect parcels without nearby (within a half mile, or a 10-minute walk) open space and preserved lands to increase nearby recreation access to residents.

_____ Protect lands that provide outdoor recreation access in areas near multi-modal transportation hubs in order to increase outdoor recreation access, especially for Overburdened Communities.

_____ Protect parcels near areas with high population density in order to increase the number of residents with nearby outdoor recreation access.

_____ Conserve parcels with Cultural Significance, areas along Scenic Byways, near existing Historic Trails, and near Wild and Scenic Rivers in order to preserve historic, environmental, and cultural character of the Highlands Region.

_____ Conserve parcels in areas identified as in or near Overburdened Communities in order to provide outdoor recreation and open space access to improve the community's health and wellbeing.

Site-specific Evaluation Questions

EXISTING RECREATION AMENITIES:

_____ Would this project lead to improved on-site recreational amenities?

_____ Does the trailhead, entrance, or parking lot accommodate large vehicles to facilitate access of boats, horse trailers, and/or RVs to the recreation site?

_____ Is there a nearby parking lot?

___ Are the parking lots near publicly accessible recreational waters large enough for boat and trailer access?

___ Are the parking lots near recreational amenities large enough to accommodate campers, buses, and/or RVs?

_____ Would this project expand or improve existing amenities in publicly accessible recreation areas?

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TOURISM & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:

_____ Could this project support tourism, travel, and local economic development in the Highlands Region?

___ Is there a plan in place to market the recreational area to attract new visitors and/or businesses?

_____ Is this parcel within walking distance of areas of concentrated economic activity such as commercial corridors, downtown areas, Main streets, or other business districts?

_____ Is this parcel within a reasonable driving distance of areas of concentrated economic activity, such as commercial corridors, downtown areas, Main streets, or other business districts?

ACCESSIBILITY & INCLUSIVITY:

_____ Will this project increase ADA accessibility of outdoor recreation amenities and expand inclusive outdoor recreation access in the Highlands Region?

PLANNING CONSISTENCY:

_____ Would conservation of this property be consistent with other local, county, or state planning documents and policies?

_____ Is the parcel identified as a priority for preservation in existing planning documents?

_____ Is the parcel on or near planned trails and/or open space areas?

LONG-TERM PLANNING:

_____ Is there an ability to maintain the area? (e.g. existing 'Friends of' group, strong local political will, a proposed maintenance plan in place)

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE:

_____ Would conservation of this parcel protect sites of Native American cultural and historical significance?

_____ Would conservation of this parcel protect under-preserved historic or cultural sites in the Highlands Region?

NEW & EXPANDED RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES:

_____ Does the proposed parcel offer opportunities for multiple kinds of outdoor recreation?

_____ Does the parcel have access to infrastructure to support certain recreational facilities (such as restrooms or potable water, or electricity for camping and RV sites)?

_____ Would the project offer opportunities for participation in types of outdoor recreation that are less common in the Highlands Region (beyond walking, hiking, and running)?

Farmland Preservation Goals

Measurable Goals

_____ Preserve unprotected farmland in order to increase the acreage of protected farmland in the Highlands Region.

_____ Conserve parcels with Important Farmland Soils in order to protect farmland with the best available soil in the Highlands Region.

_____ Conserve parcels contiguous with preserved farms in order to preserve the density of preserved farmland in the Highlands Region.

Site-specific Evaluation Questions

_____ Does the community have a "right to farm" ordinance in place?

___ Does the community have a municipal farmland preservation plan in place?

___ Is the property mentioned in this plan?

_____ Do the adjacent parcels have land uses and types amenable to farming?

_____ Does the parcel have a potable water supply?

_____ Is the property owner interested in selling their parcel?

_____ Does the property not qualify for other state, county, or local preservation programs (e.g. based on parcel size)?

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Rose-Breasted Grosbeak in Lord Stirling Park, Bernards Township, Somerset County (Highlands Council)



Liffy Island Preserve, Jefferson Township,
Morris County (Highlands Council)

Chapter 5.

Analyzing the Highlands Region for Land Preservation

Once the OSRP goals were identified through the stakeholder engagement process and reviewed by the Highlands Council for regional consistency and clarity, TPL began the parcel-level geospatial analysis of the region.

Outdoor recreation activities and enjoyment of agricultural and open spaces are made possible through investment in parks, trails, farmland preservation, and open space protection across the region. Land conservation in the Highlands Region is also essential to ensure environmental quality, economic resilience, and community wellbeing for residents and visitors, particularly through the protection of drinking water and other natural resources (see Chapter 3).

This analysis is intended to guide future investments in preservation and outdoor recreation, with parcel scores reflecting their consistency with regionwide goals. The Highlands Council seeks to enhance access to outdoor recreation and preserved open space in the region and has developed this evidence-based approach to focus investments on high-priority parcels that meet stakeholder needs.

This approach included three stages to identify recommended properties for preservation:

1. Recreation inventory: mapping of current recreational resources in the Highlands
2. Level of service analysis: quantification of how well the open space and recreation needs of a community are being met with existing resources
3. Parcel scoring system: identification of opportunities to help the Highlands region meet land preservation goals most efficiently and effectively

Recreation Inventory

To better understand the number, spatial location, and features of existing open spaces and recreational assets within the Highlands Region, the Highlands Council and TPL leveraged Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to develop an inventory of existing preserved lands, recreational assets, and resources with natural, historic, archaeological, and scenic significance.

This information was collected in collaboration and consultation with Highlands Council staff, Steering Committee members, and subcommittee members. Data included federal, state, regional, and local datasets, listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Datasets and Sources for the Highlands Recreation Inventory

- New Jersey Highlands Preserved Lands Dataset – New Jersey Highlands Council
- United States Geological Survey (USGS) Protected Areas Database version 4.0 – USGS
- National Conservation Easements Database (NCED) – Trust for Public Land
- Conservation Almanac – Trust for Public Land
- ParkServe – Trust for Public Land
- Protected Areas Database (PAD-US) Fee and Easement – Trust for Public Land

The parcel-level New Jersey Highlands Preserved Lands dataset, updated July 22, 2025, serves as the baseline layer for the inventory. TPL then added layers of new (unique) parcels and records with irregular boundary overlaps from NCED, Conservation Almanac, ParkServe, and PAD-US. Parcel selection was done specifically in that order to avoid selecting duplicate parcels from these databases.

These datapoints helped establish an existing preserved lands database for the Highlands Council to utilize and understand the extent of existing assets in the region. Table 2 summarizes the acreage and mileage of recreational resources in the Highlands Region.

Table 2. Number of parcels and total acreage or miles by outdoor recreation resource type in the Highlands Region.

Outdoor Recreation Resource	# of Preserved Parcels	Total Acreage or Miles
Hiking Trail	412	834 miles
Multi-purpose Trail	102	257 miles
ADA-compliant Trail	10	7.3 miles
Natural Areas for Birding	126	155,140 acres
Lands for Hunting	64	87,110 acres
Boat Launches	13	59,575 acres
Fishing Spots	40	105,017 acres
Swimming Spots	10	29,743 acres

By setting a baseline for recreation assets in the region, the revised preserved lands dataset can be used to track changes over time and help identify priorities for investment in outdoor recreation. For example, the dataset notes 834 miles of hiking trails, 257 miles of multi-purpose trails, and 7.3 miles of ADA-compliant trails. This discrepancy suggests a regional need to invest in ADA-compliant trails to increase access for people with limited mobility. In addition, with only 13 boat launches within the region, preservation partners in the region may want to prioritize water-based recreation and water trail access.

Level of Service Analysis

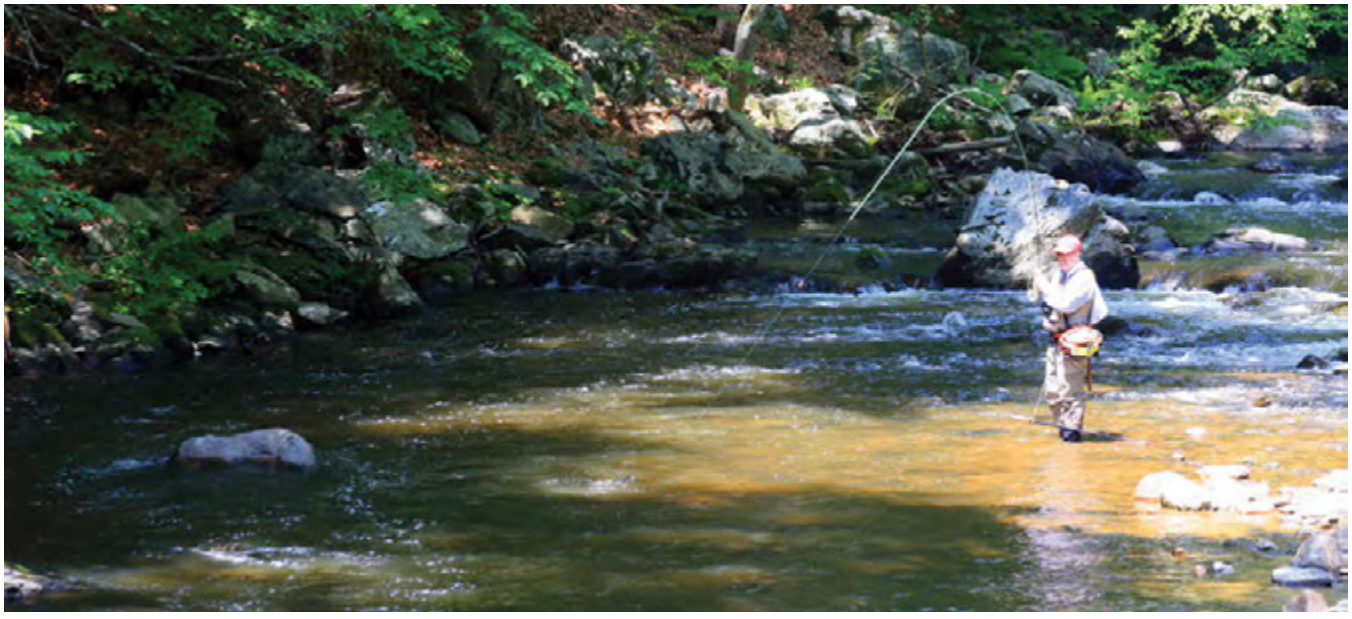
The Level of Service (LOS) analysis quantifies how well the existing open space and recreational assets within the Highlands Region meet the needs of its residents.

While many residents regularly use the region's outdoor resources, not all have the same level of access to them (based on distance from their home). Recognizing the value of recreational spaces for the health and wellbeing of all the region's residents, the Highlands Council prioritizes investment in areas where residents do not have equal access to the outdoors.

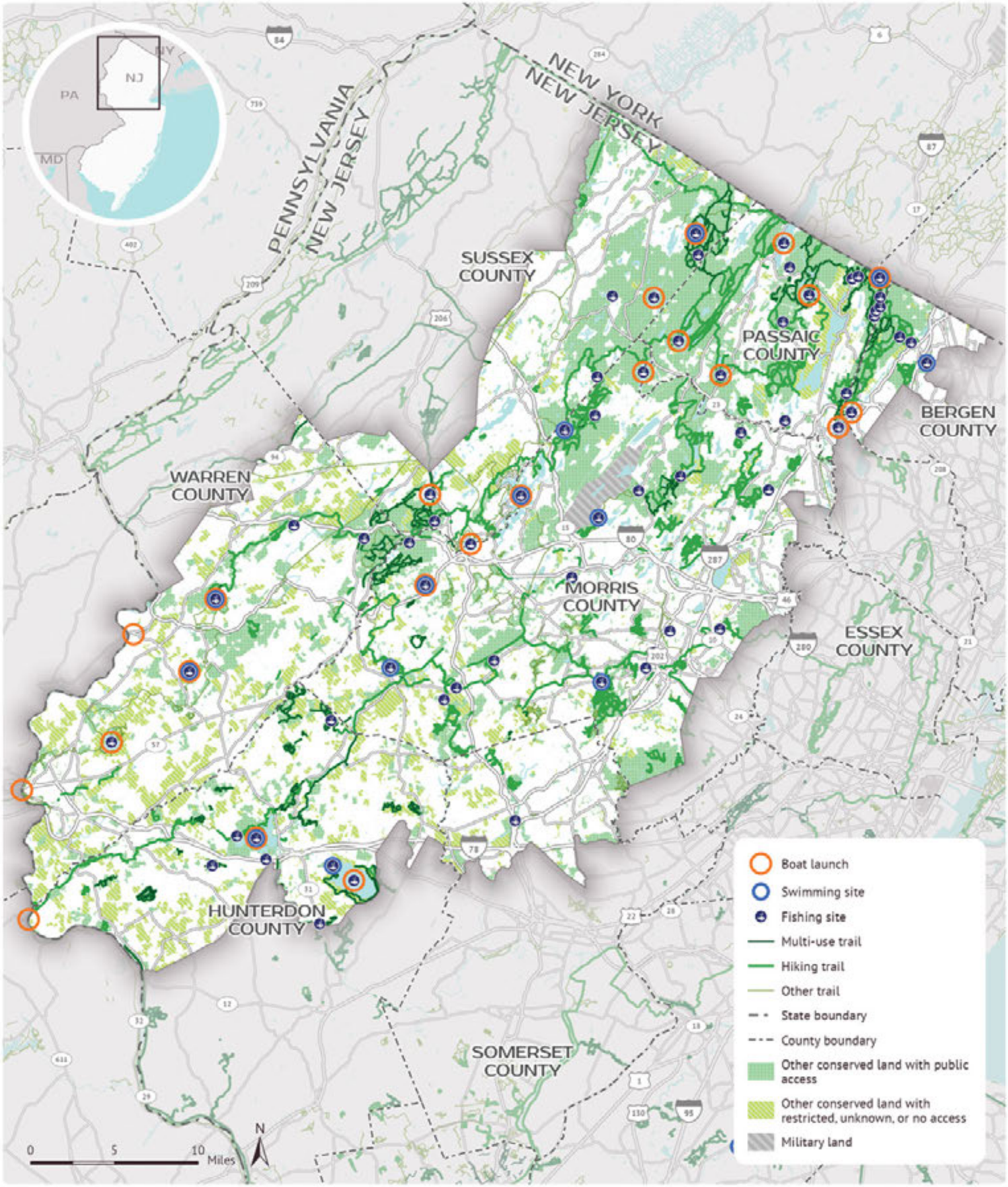
This analysis calculates residents' access to outdoor recreation, or the percentage of residents living within a 10-minute drive to public open and recreational spaces. A drive time, as opposed to a walk time, was calculated due to the rural quality of the region. Since the Highlands region offers a broad variety of recreational resources, drive times were also calculated based on the following activity types:

- Trail recreation
- Natural areas for birding
- Hunting
- Water-based recreation (boating, fishing, and swimming areas)

Due to the breadth of trail types in the Highlands Region, trail access was broken down by trail characteristic: hiking, multi-purpose, and American with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant.



South Branch Raritan River, Clinton Township, Hunterdon County (Highlands Council)



Recreation Sites

HIGHLANDS REGION OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLAN

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Access to Recreational Activities

Access to recreational activities is measured by county and the following demographic categories: population living in OBCs, children under the age of 19, and seniors age 64 and above. Table 3 summarizes the total population in the Highlands Region by county, as well as by each subcategory in the analysis.

Table 3. Population Counts (Total and by Category) Within the Highlands Region in New Jersey by County

County	Total population within Highlands Region	Population in OBCs Percent population	Children under 19 Percent population	Seniors (64+) Percent population
Bergen	37,646	4,437	7,872	8,286
		11.8%	20.9%	22.0%
Hunterdon	57,500	3,029	11,351	12,659
		5.3%	19.7%	22.0%
Morris	435,468	137,539	93,555	86,236
		31.6%	21.5%	19.8%
Passaic	65,072	4,975	12,628	14,362
		7.6%	19.4%	22.1%
Somerset	47,514	9,934	10,530	9,794
		20.9%	22.2%	20.6%
Sussex	90,984	1,828	18,663	18,690
		2.0%	20.5%	20.5%
Warren	99,854	25,665	21,029	21,684
		25.7%	21.1%	21.7%
TOTAL	**834,038**	**187,407**	**175,629**	**171,711**

DEFINING SERVICE AREAS

TPL calculated service areas by activity type based on a 10-minute drive time, considering roads where driving is not allowed and other obstacles such as highways or water that would be impassable.

As the outdoor recreation survey results indicated that many people were willing to drive an hour or more for outdoor recreation, TPL considered expanding the 10-minute drive analysis to 30-minutes or longer. However, due to the region's development patterns, the expanded travel time limited the ability to identify priority areas for outdoor recreation.

Access to each activity type is measured by total population, as well as access for residents living in Overburdened Communities (OBCs), children under the age of 19, and seniors age 65 and above. The tables on the following pages detail the results of the level of service analysis across the region by county. The results can be used to identify gaps in outdoor recreation access. Trail planners and outdoor recreation advocates can use this data to prioritize investments in trails, outdoor recreation facilities, and programming, increasing equitable access to the outdoors in the Highlands Region.

Access to Hiking Trails

Hiking is one of the most popular and accessible ways for people to connect with the outdoors in the New Jersey Highlands, fostering meaningful connections to the region's forests, ridges, streams, and scenic vistas. The Highlands contain hundreds of miles of trails, including portions of the Appalachian Trail, the Highlands Trail, and many park and preserve trail systems that provide opportunities for recreation.

Access to natural landscapes encourages regular outdoor activity while promoting stewardship and a greater understanding of the Highlands' ecological importance. As population growth continues throughout northern New Jersey, maintaining and expanding high-quality hiking opportunities remains essential for supporting healthy communities and conserving the region's natural heritage.

Using the New Jersey Statewide Trails data, this access analysis identified publicly accessible preserved lands that feature hiking trails, including those categorized from easy to difficult levels and with a variety of trail surfaces. For each park or preserved land with a trail, a 10-minute-drive service area was created from the trailhead to identify how many Highlands Region residents have access to this type of resource.[82] The results by county are described in Table 4.

Table 4. Population within a 10-minute Drive to a Hiking Trail, by County

County	Within 10-minute drive to a hiking trail			
	Highlands Population	Children	Seniors	OBC Population
Bergen	37,646	7,872	8,286	4,437
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Hunterdon	57,500	11,352	12,659	3,029
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Morris	435,384	93,539	86,218	137,539
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Passaic	64,982	12,611	14,342	4,975
	99.9%	99.9%	100%	100%
Somerset	45,603	10,140	9,305	8,613
	96.0%	96.3%	95.0%	87.0%
Sussex	90,976	18,661	18,688	1,828
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Warren	99,854	21,029	21,684	25,665
	100%	100%	100%	100%

According to the level of service analysis for hiking trails, nearly all residents in the Highlands Region had access to a hiking trail within a ten-minute drive. Limited access gaps exist in Somerset County, especially for residents living in OBCs.

Access to Multi-purpose Trails

Multi-purpose trails expand recreational opportunities by accommodating a diverse range of users, including cyclists, equestrians, runners, cross-country skiers, snowshoers and other non-motorized activities. These trail systems provide year-round opportunities for active transportation, fitness, and outdoor recreation while connecting parks, preserved lands, communities, and local businesses.

In the New Jersey Highlands, well-designed multi-use trails provide experiences suitable for users with varying interests and abilities. They also support regional tourism and local economies by attracting visitors seeking cycling, horseback riding, and other distinctive outdoor recreation experiences.

Using the New Jersey Statewide Trails data, TPL identified publicly accessible preserved lands that feature multi-use trails, or trails that accommodate biking (including mountain biking), hiking, equestrian, cross country skiing, and utility terrain vehicles. For each park or preserved land with a multi-use trail, a 10-minute-drive service area from the trailhead was then created to identify how many Highlands Region residents have access to this type of resource. The results by county are described in Table 5.

Table 5. Population within a 10-minute Drive to a Multi-Purpose Trail

County	Within 10-minute drive to an ADA trail			
	Highlands Population	Children	Seniors	OBC Population
Bergen	37,646	7,872	8,286	4,437
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Hunterdon	57,500	11,351	12,659	3,029
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Morris	408,739	87,769	80,963	128,471
	93.9%	93.8%	94.0%	93.0%
Passaic	64,982	12,611	14,342	4,975
	99.9%	99.9%	100%	100%
Somerset	20,346	4,661	4,162	464
	42.8%	44.3%	42.0%	5.0%
Sussex	88,635	18,196	18,188	1,828
	97.4%	97.5%	97.0%	100%
Warren	89,928	18,987	19,535	24,591
	90.10%	90.30%	90%	96%

Residents in Bergen, Hunterdon, and Passaic counties nearly all had 10-minute drive access to a multi-purpose trail. Conversely, less than half of Somerset County residents overall and only 5% of residents in OBCs had nearby access to these trails. Planners, advocates, and stakeholders could work to close this access gap by identifying trail opportunities that connect Somerset residents with new or expanded multi-purpose trails.

Access to American with Disabilities Act (ADA) Compliant Trails

Accessible trails are essential to ensuring that the natural beauty and recreational opportunities of the New Jersey Highlands are available to everyone, including people with disabilities, older adults, and families with young children. ADA-compliant trails help remove barriers to outdoor experiences while promoting equity, public health, and community engagement. Accessible trails allow more people to enjoy forests, lakes, wildlife viewing, and scenic landscapes through features such as firm, stable surfaces, appropriate grades, accessible parking, viewing platforms, and interpretive signage. Expanding accessible recreation throughout the Highlands supports broader conservation goals by fostering a more inclusive constituency for protecting public lands and ensuring that the physical and mental health benefits of spending time in nature can be experienced by people of all abilities.

Using the NJ Statewide Trails data, TPL identified publicly accessible preserved lands that feature ADA-compliant trails. For each park or preserved land with an ADA-compliant trail, a 10-minute-drive service area from the trailhead was then created to identify how many Highlands Region residents have access to this type of resource.[83] The results by county are described in Table 6.

Table 6. Population within a 10-minute Drive to an ADA Trail, by County

County	Within 10-minute drive to an ADA trail			
	Highlands Population	Children	Seniors	OBC Population
Bergen	13,719	3,230	2,522	1,490
	36.4%	41.0%	30.0%	34.0%
Hunterdon	53,696	10,633	11,581	3,029
	93.4%	93.7%	91.0%	100%
Morris	102,254	22,033	20,652	29,789
	23.5%	23.6%	24.0%	22.0%
Passaic	23,305	4,350	5,955	208
	35.8%	34.4%	41.0%	9.0%
Somerset	36,782	7,439	7,111	1,160
	40.4%	39.9%	38.0%	100%
Sussex	38,411	8,101	8,108	9,099
	38.5%	38.5%	37.0%	48.0%
Warren	13,719	3,230	2,522	1,490
	36.4%	41.0%	30.0%	34.0%

Achieving ADA-compliant trail access can be challenging due to the region's mountainous terrain, steep slopes, rocky soils, wetlands, and environmentally sensitive habitats. Many of the Highlands' most scenic destinations were developed around rugged landscapes that are difficult to retrofit with the grading and amenities required for ADA compliance without substantial engineering or ecological disturbance. Many trail systems were also constructed long before modern accessibility standards were established, making upgrades costly and technically complex. Morris County currently has the lowest resident accessibility to ADA-compliant trails, while Bergen, Passaic, Sussex, and Warren counties each have 10-minute drive access for just over a third of their residents. In contrast, Hunterdon County has the highest accessibility, with approximately 93 percent of all residents having access to ADA-compliant trails. In Somerset County, while 40.4% of residents have nearby access to ADA compliant trails, the mapping analysis shows that 100% of OBCs in that county have access nearby, indicating an intentional investment in access to ADA trails for its vulnerable populations. Continued investment in universally designed trails will expand inclusive outdoor recreation opportunities throughout the Highlands Region.

Access to Natural Areas for Birding

The New Jersey Highlands provide exceptional birding opportunities due to their extensive forests, wetlands, reservoirs, and grasslands which support both resident and migratory bird species. The region lies within the Atlantic Flyway, making it an important stopover area during spring and fall migration and attracting birdwatchers from around the world. Forests in the Highlands support breeding species such as the Scarlet Tanager, Wood Thrush, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Cerulean Warbler, and Broad-winged Hawk, while reservoirs and wetlands attract Bald Eagles, Ospreys, Great Blue Herons, and Belted Kingfishers. Birding contributes to local tourism, facilitates environmental education, and encourages conservation by increasing public appreciation for the Highlands' diverse habitats and their importance to migratory and resident wildlife."

Using Audubon's Birdability Map, TPL identified publicly accessible preserved lands that feature hotspots for bird watching. For each park or preserved land with a birding hotspot, a 10-minute-drive service area from a park or preserved land's entrance area was then created to identify how many Highlands Region residents have access to this activity type.[84] The results by county are described in Table 7.

Table 7. Population within a 10-minute Drive to Natural Area for Birding, by County

County	Within 10-minute drive to a natural area for birding			
	Highlands Population	Children	Seniors	OBC Population
Bergen	37,646	7,872	8,286	4,437
	100.0%	100%	100%	100%
Hunterdon	57,345	11,320	12,618	3,029
	99.7%	99.7%	100%	100%
Morris	435,384	93,539	86,218	137,539
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Passaic	64,982	12,611	14,342	4,975
	99.0%	99.9%	100%	100%
Somerset	47,514	10,530	9,794	9,934
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Sussex	90,976	18,661	18,688	1,828
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Warren	99,746	21,011	21,653	25,665
	99.9%	99.9%	100%	100%

Nearly all county residents had 10-minute drive access to Audubon Birdability areas, a reflection of the strength of the Highlands' biodiversity and natural areas.

Access to Hunting

Hunting remains an important cultural tradition and wildlife management tool throughout the New Jersey Highlands. Large areas of public and private forests and open spaces provide opportunities to hunt white-tailed deer, wild turkey, black bear, coyote, fox, squirrel, rabbit, waterfowl, and other game species. (Hunters must have valid permits and licenses and adhere to seasonal regulations, management zones, and harvest limits for New Jersey.) Deer hunting occurs primarily during the fall and winter through archery, muzzleloader, and firearm seasons, while spring and fall turkey seasons provide additional opportunities for hunters. Waterfowl seasons generally occur during the fall and winter, and small game hunting extends through much of the cooler months. Regulated hunting plays a significant role in managing wildlife populations, reducing ecological impacts associated with overabundant deer, supporting habitat conservation through license revenues, and maintaining a longstanding outdoor tradition that contributes to the region's rural character and economy.

For the hunting analysis, TPL identified public parks and open spaces that allow hunting, trapping, and fishing. Open spaces include Wildlife Management Areas, State Parks, and United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) National Wildlife Refuges. For each park or preserved land that allows hunting, a 10-minute-drive service area from a park or preserved land's entrance area was then created to identify how many Highlands Region residents have access to this activity type.[85] The results by county are described in Table 8.

Table 8. Population within a 10-minute Drive to a Hunting Area, by County

County	Within 10-minute drive to a hunting area			
	Highlands Population	Children	Seniors	OBC Population
Bergen	16,156	3,730	3,170	1,490
	42.9%	47.4%	38.0%	34.0%
Hunterdon	57,135	11,278	12,550	3,029
	99.4%	99.4%	99.0%	100%
Morris	388,229	83,157	77,228	126,520
	89.2%	88.9%	90.0%	93.0%
Passaic	64,617	12,533	14,263	4,940
	99.3%	99.2%	99.0%	99.0%
Somerset	5,379	1,159	1,242	0
	11.0%	11.0%	13.0%	0%
Sussex	90,962	18,659	18,684	1,828
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Warren	99,854	21,029	21,684	25,665
	100%	100%	100%	100%

Many county residents have 10-minute drive access to areas accessible to hunting, except for Bergen County (42.9%) and Somerset County (11%). As the most populous county in New Jersey, the development patterns in Bergen County likely do not lend itself to comprehensive nearby hunting access. Somerset County has less publicly-accessible forestland compared to other Highlands counties, though it has many preserved lands, county and municipal parks, and conservation areas available for other forms of recreation. Hunting in Somerset County is limited to a few state Wildlife Management Areas, which makes nearby access for every resident challenging.

Access to Water-Based Recreation

The Highlands' lakes, rivers, reservoirs, and streams provide abundant opportunities for boating, fishing, swimming, paddling, and other water-based recreation while showcasing some of New Jersey's most significant freshwater resources. Popular destinations include Lake Hopatcong for motorized boating, sailing, fishing, and swimming; Wawayanda Lake for kayaking, canoeing, fishing, and its designated swimming beach; Spruce Run Recreation Area for boating, fishing, and swimming; Monksville Reservoir for canoeing, kayaking, sailing, and fishing; and the Delaware River along the western edge of the Highlands for canoeing, kayaking, tubing, and angling. Coldwater streams throughout the Highlands also support trout fishing, including stocked and naturally reproducing populations in rivers such as the South Branch Raritan River, Musconetcong River, and Pequest River. These recreational waters contribute substantially to the region's quality of life, tourism economy, and appreciation of the Highlands' role in protecting New Jersey's critical drinking water resources.

In this analysis, water-based recreation included boat launches, fishing, and swimming. NJDEP's Great Fishing Close to Home data includes over 400 publicly accessible lakes, ponds, and reservoirs in New Jersey. This access analysis used the Great Fishing New Jersey data to identify publicly accessible preserved lands that overlap with open access boat ramps, open access fishing locations, and swimming access points. Additionally, the analysis supplemented boat ramp data using 2022 data from Rutgers University. For each boating, fishing, and swimming water access point, a 10-minute-drive service area was then created to identify how many Highlands Region residents have access to water-based recreation activities near home.[86] The results by county are described in Table 9, 10, 11, and 12.

Table 9. Population within a 10-minute Drive to a Water-Based Recreation Area, by County

County	Within 10-minute drive to water-based recreation			
	Highlands Population	Children	Seniors	OBC Population
Bergen	37,646	7,872	21,488	4,437
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Hunterdon	55,712	11,007	32,560	3,029
	97.0%	97.0%	96.0%	100%
Morris	420,332	90,148	247,423	137,539
	97.0%	96.0%	96.0%	100%
Passaic	64,982	12,611	38,029	4,975
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Somerset	42,117	9,397	24,301	9,060
	89.0%	89.0%	86.0%	91.0%
Sussex	89,813	18,380	52,978	1,828
	99.0%	98.0%	99.0%	100%
Warren	96,651	20,375	55,346	24,683
	97.0%	97.0%	97.0%	96.0%

Overall, residents in the Highlands region enjoy strong access to water-based recreation ranging from 89% to 100% 10-minute drive access. Somerset County doesn't have some of the large lakes that other counties have as regional outdoor recreation destinations, such as Lake Hopatcong or Greenwood Lake. It does contain important rivers and reservoirs, but many are managed to protect drinking water supplies for the region rather than facilitating recreation. The Delaware and Raritan Canal offers non-motorized boating and fishing in certain areas, but it is not suitable for swimming. There are also limited launch facilities at some sites, either by design or because of private property ownership. For example, the Raritan River supports fishing and paddling, but access points are dispersed along the river.

Table 10. Population within a 10-minute Drive to a Boat Ramp, by County

County	Within 10-minute drive to a boat ramp			
	Highlands Population	Children	Seniors	OBC Population
Bergen	19,635	4,544	3,947	2,702
	52.2%	57.7%	48.0%	61.0%
Hunterdon	23,467	4,681	4,988	1,777
	40.8%	41.2%	39.0%	59.0%
Morris	101,881	21,504	21,275	22,378
	23.4%	23.0%	25.0%	16.0%
Passaic	57,588	11,167	12,881	4,975
	88.5%	88.4%	90.0%	100%
Somerset	36,399	7,168	7,202	1,160
	40.0%	38	39.0%	100%
Sussex	69,680	15,001	14,825	20,430
	69.8%	71.3%	68.0%	80.0%
Warren	19,635	4,544	3,947	2,702
	52.2%	57.7%	48.0%	61.0%

Boat ramp access varied significantly by county, ranging from 23.4% overall in Morris County to 88.5% in Passaic County. Compared to other forms of water-based infrastructure, boat ramps require the most significant investments (specialized infrastructure, design and permitting, construction costs), parking needs, and suitable water body characteristics. Expanding public boating access would require significant capital investments and coordination with resource management agencies that make new boat ramps more difficult to develop than other ways to facilitate water-based recreation.

Table 11. Population within a 10-minute Drive to a Fishing Spot, by County

County	Within 10-minute drive to fishing			
	Highlands Population	Children	Seniors	OBC Population
Bergen	37,646	7,872	8,286	4,437
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Hunterdon	53,576	10,589	11,583	3,029
	93.2%	93.3%	91.0%	100%
Morris	420,332	90,148	82,761	137,539
	96.5%	96.4%	96.0%	100%
Passaic	64,982	12,611	14,342	4,975
	99.9%	99.9%	100%	100%
Somerset	42,117	9,397	8,419	9,060
	88.6%	89.2%	86.0%	91.0%
Sussex	89,813	18,380	18,454	1,828
	98.7%	98.5%	99.0%	100%
Warren	65,070	13,222	14,509	10,651
	65.2%	62.9%	67.0%	42.0%

Freshwater fishing is one of the most widely enjoyed outdoor recreational activities in the New Jersey Highlands, providing opportunities for anglers of all ages while fostering connections to the region's rivers, lakes, reservoirs, and streams. The vast majority of residents in the region had nearby access to fishing spots, including 100% of residents in Bergen County and 99.9% in Passaic County. Warren County had the lowest nearby access to fishing spots at 65.2%, and for OBCs in that county, 42%.

Despite its abundance of rivers, streams, and lakes, much of the Warren County's waterfront is privately owned or near agricultural land, which limits public shoreline access. This is also evident in the boat ramps and swim area analyses. With fewer large recreation lakes, private ownership along the Delaware River, and its rural characteristics, fewer residents in Warren County have access to public water-based recreation areas compared to other part of the region.

Table 12. Population within a 10-minute Drive to a Swim Area, by County

County	Within 10-minute drive to swimming			
	Highlands Population	Children	Seniors	OBC Population
Bergen	32,485	6,794	7,060	4,292
	86.3%	86.3%	85.0%	97.0%
Hunterdon	26,162	5,106	5,416	1,703
	45.5%	45.0%	43.0%	56.0%
Morris	207,993	45,157	38,981	71,167
	47.8%	48.3%	45.0%	52.0%
Passaic	1,937	391	432	208
	3.0%	3.1%	3.0%	9.0%
Somerset	924	229	176	0
	1.9%	2.2%	2.0%	0%
Sussex	25,074	4,941	4,766	1,160
	27.6%	26.5%	25.0%	100%
Warren	35,006	7,375	7,339	8,113
	35.1%	35.1%	34.0%	32.0%

Swimming areas are essential to the Highlands Region, directly connecting people to the region's defining natural asset: its freshwater. There are many lakes and rivers in the Highlands Region that facilitate accessible, family-oriented recreation opportunities for both residents and visitors. Swimming areas are also important for public health, as they provide places for physical activity outdoors, as well as summer heat relief as we face increasingly hotter temperatures. Swimming destinations in the Highlands Region include Lake Wawayanda in Wawayanda State Park, Lake Hopatcong in Hopatcong State Park, and the Highlands Natural Pool in Ringwood.

There is significant variation among swimming area accessibility across the region. Just over 86% of Bergen County's Highlands residents live within a 10-minute drive of swimming; while only 1.9% of Somerset County's and 3.0% of Passaic County's residents have 10-minute drive access. This is greatly driven by geography—for example, Bergen County has Darlington County Park in Mahwah with three lakes, two of which are dedicated to swimming. However, accessibility is also key. While Passaic County has many lakes, reservoirs, and rivers, for example, they are not available for swimming (including Ramapo Lake and Shepherd Lake). Additionally, some water-based recreation areas (like the Ramapo River) may be suitable for fishing and non-motorized boating, but not public swimming. Communities may be close to water, but lack meaningful swimming access due to steep topography, private property or conservation land constraints, and a lack of designated swimming facilities.

Parcel Scoring Analysis

The Highlands Council worked with its subcommittee members and TPL to align goals in open space conservation, outdoor recreation, and agricultural preservation with map-based criteria for evaluating parcels. Individual parcels in the Highlands Region were scored 1–10 based on how well they met the three goals. The Highlands Council, land preservation partners, and communities can use the results of this analysis to identify places within the Highlands Region that meet regional goals and provide multiple benefits to communities.

PARCEL SELECTION

The Highlands Council and TPL refined a parcel list in the Highlands Region starting with the following datasets:

1. A statewide composite of parcels from the New Jersey Office of Information Technology's Office of GIS (NJOGIS)[87]
2. A comprehensive preserved lands database created for the OSRP through the Open Space and Recreation Inventory
3. Parcels with the New Jersey Farmland database from the NJ Department of Agriculture[88]

The list was then filtered to select parcels that are:

1. located within the Highlands Region;
2. not already preserved, either in fee or by easement;
3. greater than 5 acres (separately or when clustered with adjacent parcels)[89];
4. not shared areas for homeowners associations or condominiums, or single-family homes;
5. land-based (i.e., parcels that overlapped lakes were excluded); and
6. designated as being vacant, residential, or qualified farmland as determined by property class in the MOD-IV dataset.[90]

Based on the recommendations of the subcommittee members, the size parameters for parcel selection take into consideration lands that may have high resource value but may not qualify for other traditional preservation and acquisition methods due to size or other site constraints. The property classes helped prioritize undeveloped areas—residential properties that owners may want to protect in the future, such as through purchase by a land trust—and areas that are classified as qualified farmland.

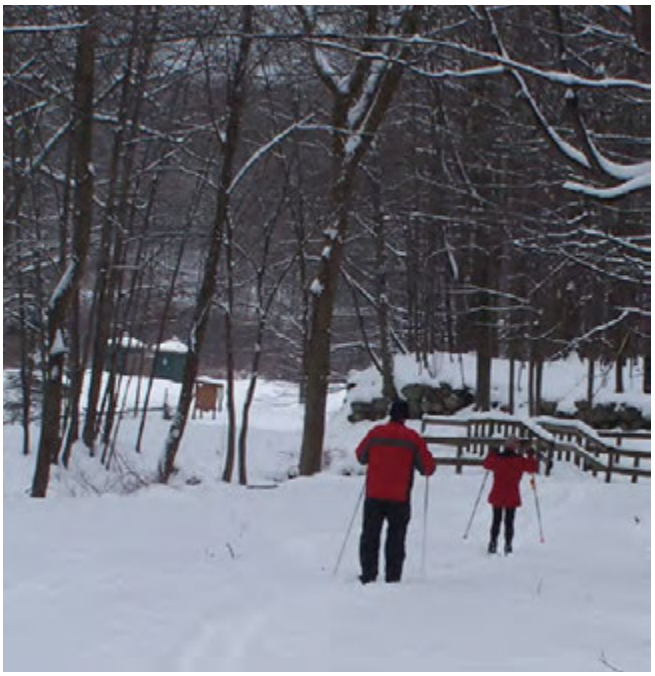
PARCEL SCORING

Once the baseline of parcels was determined and filtered, the remaining parcels were scored 1-10 based on how well they met the goals established by the Highlands Council and subcommittees (see Chapter 4).

The Highlands Council worked with TPL and the subcommittees to link the three thematic goals (outdoor recreation, open space protection, and agricultural and farmland preservation) to map-based data. The data includes factors such as recreation potential; farmland/agricultural value; forest resources; environmentally sensitive areas/resources; habitat and habitat connectivity; water resource protection; historical, archaeological and scenic resources; and proximity and contiguity with existing preserved lands. Each datapoint communicates a particular value that a parcel of land could hold to make it suitable for preservation.

Each parcel was scored 1–10 on how well it aligned with OSRP land preservation goals. For Open Space Conservation, for example, a parcel would earn a higher score based on proximity to existing preserved lands, habitat for special-status and endangered species, and other critical natural resources.

The results of the parcel scoring analysis are available on the Highlands website at www.nj.gov/njhighlands/gis/REX/.



Wawayanda State Forest, West Milford Township, Passaic County (Highlands Council)

Table 13. Highlands Parcel Analysis – Linking Map-Based Data and Thematic Scores

Themes & Criteria	Methodology	Outdoor Recreation	Open Space Conservation	Farmland Preservation
Recreation				
Opportunities for Trail Continuity	Parcels that overlap planned trails (identified by the steering committee or subcommittee members) receive a score of 10. Parcels near existing trails score 1–9 based on distance from trail, with higher scores for parcels closer to trails.	✓		
Adjacent to Waterbodies	Parcels within 100 meters of all lakes, ponds, reservoirs greater than 10 acres and large perennial streams receive a score between 1–10 based on distance. All other parcels receive a score of 0.	✓	✓	
Opportunities to Connect with Existing Conserved Lands	Parcels within 100 meters from existing preserved lands that provide passive recreation and are not currently protected receive a score between 1 and 10. Passive recreation includes low-impact activities like hiking, non-motorized boating, birdwatching, fishing, and hunting. Unconserved parcels up to 100 meters from the remaining parcels receive a score of 1 to 10 based on the percentage of natural land cover types on the parcel, including forests, wetlands, and water. The greater percentages of natural land cover types received the highest scores. All other parcels receive a 0 score, including those already protected and those without passive recreation opportunities.	✓	✓	
Connectivity and Multi-modal Transportation				
Transportation Access Score	Parcels overlapping with the Highlands Council Transit Score data layer receive a score of 10. Parcels score higher (between 1–9) if closer to regional multimodal opportunities.	✓		
Proximity to Existing Trails	Parcels receive a score of 1–10 based on distance to trails, with closer trails scoring higher. Parcels more than one mile from an existing trail receive a score of 0.	✓		
Proximity to Areas with High Population Density	Parcels receive a score of 1–10 based on distance to areas of high population density, with higher scores given for parcels closer to high density areas. High density areas were calculated using natural breaks within population density data for the Highlands Region.	✓		✓
Critical Habitat				
Bird Areas and Migratory Routes	Parcels overlapping the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture focus areas and Audubon Important Bird Areas receive a score of 10. Parcels score 1–9 based on overlap with threatened and endangered avian species habitat, with higher scores received for greater overlap.	✓	✓	

Themes & Criteria	Methodology	Outdoor Recreation	Open Space Conservation	Farmland Preservation
Critical Habitat	Parcels score 1–10 using natural breaks on mean landscape rank value. Parcels score higher with greater opportunity to conserve critical habitat. The critical habitat data set is a product of the Landscape Project, a proactive, ecosystem-level approach to the long-term protection of imperiled and priority species and their important habitats in New Jersey. The data set documents threatened and endangered species habitat and provides a predictable foundation for proactive land use planning.		✓	
Vernal Pools	Parcels that overlap with a confirmed vernal pool(s) receive a score of 10. All others scored 1–9 based on distance to vernal pools, with higher scores for parcels closer to vernal pools.		✓	
Wildlife Corridors	Parcels that overlap with wildlife corridors receive a score of 10. All others are scored 1–9 based on distance to wildlife corridors, with higher scores for parcels closer to wildlife corridors.		✓	
Natural Heritage Priority Sites	Parcels score 1–10 based on overlap with biodiversity classes in the New Jersey Natural Heritage Program data. The Natural Heritage Database contains 343 Natural Heritage Priority Sites, representing some of the best remaining habitat for rare species and rare ecological communities in the state. Data classifies sites with a biodiversity rank from B1, scoring 10 points, to B5, scoring a minimum score of 6, in recognition of the general biodiversity present at the site. Parcels within 100 meters of any Natural Heritage site receive 5 points; all other parcels score a 0.		✓	
Special Environmental Zone	Parcels that are classified as overlapping the Special Environmental Zone (SEZ) receive a score of 10. All others receive a score of 0.		✓	
Proximity to Nearest Conserved Land	Parcels adjacent to conserved lands score a 10. All others score 1–9 based on distance, with parcels closer in distance scoring higher.		✓	
Core Forest Cover	Parcels score 0–10 based on percent of core forest cover, with parcels having greater percentages of forest cover receiving higher scores.		✓	
Water Quality				
Groundwater Recharge Areas	Parcels score 1-10 based on overlapping mean Drought Ground Water Recharge (DGWR) Areas. (The DGWR refers to the volume of groundwater that is naturally available for use over a period, considering factors like rainfall, recharge, and extraction rates.) Polygons within the DGWR dataset are assigned a value based on its estimated recharge rate. Parcels with higher scores provide greatest benefit for groundwater recharge.		✓	

Themes & Criteria	Methodology	Outdoor Recreation	Open Space Conservation	Farmland Preservation
Surface Water Buffers	Parcels score 1–10 based on percentage overlap with Open Waters Protection Areas. Parcels receiving higher scores provide a greater buffer of protection around open waters.	✓	✓	
Wellhead Protection Areas	Parcels score based on which wellhead protection tier it overlaps, with Tier 1 receiving a score of 10, Tier 2 receiving 7, Tier 3 receiving 5, and all other parcels receiving a score of 0.		✓	
Carbonate Bedrock Layer	Parcels score 1–10 based on percentage of overlap with carbonate bedrock, with higher scores going to parcels with more overlap.		✓	
Climate Resiliency				
Wildfire Risk	Parcels score 1–10 on mean burn probability rating, with higher scores for higher burn probabilities.		✓	
Flood Zones	Parcels score based on percentage of overlap with flood zones, with higher scores going to parcels with more overlap.		✓	
Historic and Cultural Significance				
Areas with Cultural Significance	Parcels containing a historic feature receive a score of 10. Parcels within a historic district receive a score of 5. All others receive a score of 0.	✓		
Areas along Scenic Byways	Parcels within 100 meters of a scenic byway receive a score of 10. Parcels within a scenic resource area receive a score of 7. All others receive a score of 0.	✓	✓	
Proximity to Historic Trails	Parcels adjacent to historic trails (specifically Washington Rochambeau National Historic Trail, the Morris Canal Greenway, Appalachian NST, Patriot's Path Trail, the Highlands Trail, and the 9–11 Trail) receive a score of 10. All others receive a score of 0.	✓		
Wild and Scenic Rivers	Parcels adjacent to a Wild and Scenic River receive a score of 10. All others receive a score based on distance from the river (up to 1 mile away).	✓	✓	
Open Space and Farmland				
Unprotected Farmland	Parcels that contain unpreserved farmland receive a score of 10. All other parcels receive a score of 0.			✓
High-Quality Farmland Soils	Parcels that contain Important Farmland Soils (as defined by the Highlands Council RMP) receive a score of 10. Those that contain soils of statewide importance receive a score of 8. Those that contain unique soils receive a score of 6. Those that contain soils of statewide importance but are drained receive a score of 5. All others receive a score of 0.			✓
Adjacent to Preserved Farms	Parcels adjacent to preserved farmland receive a score of 10. Other parcels are scored as 1–9 based on the density of farms in their area, with higher scores given where more farms already exist.			✓

Themes & Criteria	Methodology	Outdoor Recreation	Open Space Conservation	Farmland Preservation
Economic and Community Development				
Development Pressure	Parcels scored based on regionwide development pressures, based on the Highlands Land Use Capability Zone (LUCZ), property class, inclusion in a Sewer Service Area (SSA), composite zone, and road type they are located on. Parcels facing the highest development pressure scored a 10, while a score of 5 indicates that initial development pressure factors are present. Parcels that are mostly water or are preserved received a score of 0. This dataset was created for this analysis; additional details follow this table.	✓	✓	✓
Overburdened Community	Parcels receive a score based on distance from census block groups designated as "Overburdened" in the NJ Environmental Justice (EJ) Combined Stressor Summary maps. Parcels within an overburdened block group receive a score of 10. All others receive a score based on distance from an overburdened block group.	✓		
Lack of Recreational Open Space	Parcels receive a score based on the Lack of Recreational Open Space in the New Jersey EJ Law Combined Stressor Summary Maps. The EJ maps determine Lack of Recreational Open Space based on the population per acre of open space within a quarter mile. Parcels within a Census Block Group with the lowest Lack of Recreational Open Space value receive a score of 10 are. All other parcels receive a score of 0.	✓		

Development Pressures Data Layer

This dataset was formulated by the NJ Highlands Council and represents the potential for development pressures based on a variety of current designations at the parcel level.

Parcels in the region were assigned one point (and eligible for additional points) if:

1. they are located within the Highlands Planning Area;
2. the total area of Highlands Protection Zone, Conservation Zone or their sub-zones (Wildlife Management Area and Environmentally Constrained Conservation sub-zone) is larger than 5 acres; and
3. they are classified as having a MOD-IV property class of vacant (1) or qualified farm (3A and 3B).

Additional points were given to each parcel based on the following criteria:

- within 250 feet of non-restricted access or local road (road subtypes equal to US Highway, State Highway, County Series 500 Road, and County Series 600 Road);
- within a Highlands composite zone conducive to increased development intensity (Garden Apartments, High Density Residential, Industrial, Medium Density Residential, Mixed Use, Mixed Use/Age Restricted Housing, Office/Commercial, Retail, Senior or Age Restricted Housing, Suburban Residential, Townhouse Attached Residential).
- adjacent to a NJ DEP Sewer Service Area (SSA);
- An additional 2 points were added if the parcel was within the DEP SSA.

Parcels were excluded from analysis and received 0 points if they were determined to be one of more of the following:

- preserved parcels (cannot be developed),
- >95% water (cannot be developed),
- parcels located in a Highlands Center (these are appropriate places for development), or
- part of an HOA (cannot be further developed as a contingency of the HOA).

RESULTS OF PARCEL SCORING FOR PRESERVATION IN THE HIGHLANDS

A total of 9,567 unconserved parcels were analyzed in the Highlands Region for the OSRP (Table 14).

Table 14. Total Number of Parcels Analyzed for OSRP by County

County	Number of Parcels Analyzed
Bergen	96
Hunterdon	2,145
Morris	2,549
Passaic	473
Somerset	350
Sussex	1,432
Warren	2,522
Total	**9,567**

Each parcel was scored using the individual criteria in Table 13; these values were then summed into the three aggregate scores for Open Space, Outdoor Recreation, and Farmland Preservation. The parcels received a raw score based on the individual criteria components. For example, the Farmland Preservation score is based on Important Farmlands Soil, Level of Protection, Contiguity to Existing Preserved Farms, and Development Pressure (see graphic below).

Score for Important Farmland Soil
+ Score for Unconserved Farmland
+ Score for Contiguity to Preserved Farms
+ Score for Development Pressure

Parcel's Raw Score for Farmland Preservation

Next, raw scores were "normalized" on a scale of 1–10, with a score of 10 indicating that a parcel holds a high value for its ability to meet the preservation goals of conserving open space, improving outdoor recreation, or preserving farmland. Normalizing the values facilitates easy comparison between aggregate scores, even if they had varying numbers of criteria that comprised them (and therefore wide-ranging raw scores).

The three tables on the following pages describes the breakdown of parcel scoring by county for each category: open space, outdoor recreation, and farmland preservation. The Highlands Council considers parcels with aggregate scores seven or higher best aligned with the goals of the OSRP.

Open Space Conservation

Open space in the Highlands Region protects critical habitat, drinking water quality, and other environmentally-sensitive resources. For open space conservation, 2,799 parcels (31.2% of all parcels scored for open space) scored 7 or higher. Morris County had the most top-scoring parcels (907 scored a 7 through 10), followed by Sussex County (873) and Warren County (856 parcels); however, Sussex County had the most parcels that scored 10 out of 10 (Table 15).

Table 15. Total Number of Parcels, by County, Scoring High on Potential for Preservation for Open Space Conservation

Open Space Conservation								
Scores	**TOTAL**	**Bergen**	**Hunterdon**	**Morris**	**Passaic**	**Somerset**	**Sussex**	**Warren**
10	309	3	8	60	30	0	129	79
9	633	4	34	430	73	4	196	192
8	881	6	70	176	88	14	262	265
7	1,094	12	138	241	89	8	286	320
6	1,385	8	263	361	83	18	229	426
5	1,365	12	294	422	47	45	146	399
4	1,373	12	399	406	34	58	93	371
3	1,299	454	387	18	66	60	301	1,299
2	898	13	371	266	11	85	21	131
1	330	13	114	100	0	52	10	41
TOTAL	**9,567**	**96**	**2,145**	**2,549**	**473**	**350**	**1,432**	**2,522**

Large, contiguous forests, extensive wetlands, productive headwater streams, and significant wildlife habitat remain relatively intact in these counties, creating opportunities to protect landscapes that provide regional ecological benefits.

Parcels in these three counties scored high for wildlife corridors and proximity to nearby preserved lands, promoting continuity and connectivity between preserved parcels. Parcels in Sussex County scored particularly high due to the density of surface water (as one of the criteria is conservation of surface water buffers to protect open water), while Warren County had many high-scoring parcels due to its geographic overlap with carbonate bedrock.

Compared to more densely developed portions of the Highlands, these counties also contain larger undeveloped parcels that can be conserved before they become fragmented by future development. In addition, these counties encompass substantial portions of the Highlands' drinking water resources, critical habitat for rare and threatened species, and important recreational assets, including state parks, Wildlife Management Areas, and trail networks.

Outdoor Recreation

The parcel analysis for outdoor recreation focused on similar resources as the open space analysis, but discouraged public access in especially critical resources areas (like critical habitat, vernal pools, wildlife corridors, Natural Heritage priority sites, Special Environmental Zones (SEZs), and dense forested areas). It also encouraged connections to downtowns, population centers, and multi-modal transportation opportunities to facilitate improved outdoor recreation access in the region.

As a result, Morris County again had the most top-scoring parcels for outdoor recreation (788), though fewer overall than for open space. This is likely significantly driven by connectivity opportunities in Morris County. Sussex County (442 parcels) is next, followed by Hunterdon County (332). Throughout the region, 2,326 parcels (24.3% of the total) scored 7 or higher for outdoor recreation. (Table 16).

Table 16. Total Number of Parcels, by County, Scoring High on Potential for Preservation for Outdoor Recreation

Outdoor Recreation								
Scores	**TOTAL**	**Bergen**	**Hunterdon**	**Morris**	**Passaic**	**Somerset**	**Sussex**	**Warren**
10	138	0	14	60	7	2	24	31
9	397	13	35	153	33	2	98	63
8	750	14	94	261	76	8	140	157
7	1,042	12	189	314	97	17	180	233
6	1,284	16	184	419	70	37	236	322
5	1,503	18	259	422	72	77	262	393
4	1,410	13	301	334	49	73	207	433
3	1,329	7	359	307	31	57	154	414
2	1,124	3	434	184	30	58	108	307
1	590	0	276	95	8	19	23	169
TOTAL	**9,567**	**96**	**2,145**	**2,549**	**473**	**350**	**1,432**	**2,522**

High-scoring parcels in Morris County were driven by transportation connectivity and a higher population density, as well as access to open water for water-based recreation. Parcels in Morris County also scored highly for economic and community development criteria, with significantly higher scores received for development pressures, proximity to overburdened communities, and places with a lack of recreational open space nearby.

Farmland Preservation

The parcel analysis for farmland preservation focused on risk of losing farmland (due to a current lack of protection or overall development risk), presence of Important Farmland Soils, and contiguity to existing preserved farms. Parcels also scored highly when they were located near densely-populated areas, facilitating agrotourism or access to nearby markets for selling products.

Out of the three score categories, farmland preservation has the most high-scoring parcels: 3,347 parcels (37.5% of the total) scored a 7 or higher for the category.

In part, this is driven by the criteria that determine parcel scores (see Table 13). Parcels that scored highly for open space and outdoor recreation, for example, included several critical habitat considerations that did not influence scores for agriculture. However, the high number of 7 to 10 score agricultural parcels also reflects their availability—agriculture is the second largest land use in the Highlands Region, after residential use, and the region contains excellent soils for farming.[91]

Table 17. Total Number of Parcels, by County, Scoring High on Potential for Preservation for Farmland Preservation

Farmland Preservation								
Scores	**TOTAL**	**Bergen**	**Hunterdon**	**Morris**	**Passaic**	**Somerset**	**Sussex**	**Warren**
10	376	0	118	43	0	10	16	189
9	775	0	237	115	1	27	39	356
8	1,048	0	284	244	20	35	72	393
7	1,148	0	380	235	29	42	98	364
6	826	4	175	195	35	15	144	258
5	942	4	244	189	65	23	148	269
4	1,461	26	213	561	63	98	168	332
3	1,190	11	235	360	66	61	271	186
2	1,191	33	121	450	135	23	323	106
1	610	18	138	157	1	16	153	69
TOTAL	**9,567**	**96**	**2,145**	**2,549**	**473**	**350**	**1,432**	**2,522**

The scores in Hunterdon and Warren reflect the amount of unpreserved farmland, Important Farmland soils, and opportunities for land preservation adjacent to existing, preserved farms. Preserving clusters of farmland supports agritourism opportunities in the Highlands Region, where visits to farms and farmstands can attract visitors to the region. Parcels in Warren County, while primarily rural, did score highly because of a few more densely populated areas like Phillipsburg and Hackettstown.

Overall Results

Seven parcels (including four in Morris County and one each in Hunterdon, Sussex, and Warren Counties) all received a 9 score. Nearly 460 parcels scored a 7 or higher for all three goals:

- 67 parcels in Hunterdon County
- 98 parcels in Morris County
- 35 parcels in Passaic County
- 2 parcels in Somerset County
- 72 parcels in Sussex County
- 185 parcels in Warren County

There are only two municipalities in Bergen County that overlap the Highlands Region (Mahwah Township and Oakland Borough). Because of its dense development patterns and limited overlap with the Highlands Region, there are few high-scoring parcels across the three goals (notably, there are no parcels scoring over 6 for agricultural and farmland preservation). There are 13 parcels that score a 9 for outdoor recreation, but none received a 10 score. Twenty-three parcels scored a 7 or higher for open space conservation.

In contrast, Passaic County has a high number of open space/outdoor recreation scores. Thirty parcels receive a 10-score for open space conservation, with another 73 scoring a 9; seven parcels receive a 10-score for outdoor recreation, with another 33 parcels scoring a 9; and while there is only one 9-score for agricultural preservation, there are 20 parcels scoring 8 in the county.

The results in Somerset County are significant for the high number of 10-scoring (10) and 9-scoring (270) parcels in agricultural and farmland preservation. There are five municipalities in the county that are in the Highlands Region. Within those, 46,546 acres are in the Planning Area of the region.

Leveraging Results

The findings from this analysis establish an important framework for land protection in the Highlands Region. The OSRP can focus and empower practitioners by providing parcel-level detail and enhance advocacy for protection by grounding it in map-based evidence on access to these resources and activities. It also facilitates quick comparisons between sites, enabling land trusts and planners to identify which land uses may best align with available parcels and preservation goals. For example, if a landowner is looking to sell a parcel, the scoring analysis can support decision-making about whether it should be preserved as open space or available to the public for outdoor recreation.

The results of the analysis should not be used to deter land protections. Parcels that score a 1 or 2 should still encourage land trusts and planners to conduct a subjective, site-specific review for goal alignment using the checklists in Chapter 4. Scores are relative to all other unprotected places in the region, meaning a parcel may not rank among the highest-value sites in the Highlands Region overall; it may be the best preservation opportunity in a given community. The analysis reflects the best available data at the time of the research, and may not capture all critical resources, land use changes, or projects already underway.

Overall, the considerable number of high-scoring parcels in the analysis emphasizes how significantly underfunded preservation efforts remain in the region, particularly given land values, development pressures, housing needs, climate risk, and other factors influencing land use patterns in New Jersey.

Parcel-level reporting on the existing site resources is available through the Highlands Council's REX interactive map. Preservation ranking will also be available as a layer within the application, facilitating a more proactive and strategic approach to land preservation in the Highlands Region. The map-based data demonstrates not only the importance of land protection, but also the current need for direct funding to the Highlands Region to meet its land preservation goals.



Kincaid Woods, Boontown Township, Morris County (Highlands Council)



Highlands Trail, Allamuchy Mountain State Park,
Allamuchy Township, Warren County (Highlands Council)

Chapter 6.

Acquisition and Funding for the Highlands Region

The Highlands Council ensures that public funds and other resources are used to prioritize and protect critical natural resources in the region. Once practitioners complete their GIS analysis and subjective evaluation, they will need to identify the funding sources to preserve the parcel.

OSRP Funding Needs

To preserve the high-value parcels identified in the OSRP mapping analysis, the region needs new and enhanced funding streams to meet conservation needs.

Limited land availability, competing development pressure, and the current political and economic climate make funding availability a significant challenge in New Jersey. The Highlands Council recommends enhancing for funding conservation programs at the municipal, county, and state level, including the Highlands Development Credits, Green Acres, New Jersey Farmland Preservation, and New Jersey Water Supply Authority programs, so the region can be proactive and competitive when opportunities arise to preserve high-value parcels.

The 2026 State of the Highlands report stresses the need for appropriate funding for the Highlands Council:

"Two decades of neglect have put the Highlands Council, the Highlands Act and the state's water supply at risk. Fortunately, the steps necessary to remedy the biggest issues facing the region and the state are relatively simple and known. Funding program initiatives can be accomplished through access to existing sources such as the dedicated portion of the Corporate Business Tax (CBT) or the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative Funds (RGGI), both of which are currently underutilized. The addition of essential staff could be accomplished with a modest annual investment of less than $1 million in a state budget of over $60 billion."

CONSERVATION EASEMENTS VS. FEE-SIMPLE ACQUISITIONS

Traditionally, open space in the Highlands Region has been preserved by fee or easement acquisitions funded by the NJDEP Green Acres Program and the State Agriculture Development Committee Farmland Preservation Program.

The state, counties, municipalities, and non-government organizations (NGOs) purchase land outright through direct or fee simple acquisition. Fee simple acquisition fully compensates landowners and allows governments or NGOs to assume total control over the land. This approach often ensures public access to preserved lands (unlike conservation easements). However, fee simple can be costly and, when maintained by the government, may remove the land from the tax roll.

A conservation easement is a voluntary, legal agreement that permanently limits uses of the land to protect its conservation values. Easements protect habitat; protect working farms, ranches, and forests; keep land privately owned and on the tax rolls; and help maintain ecosystem services

Source: Highlands Council, Land Preservation and Stewardship Technical Report (2008); Trust for Public Land NCED StoryMap (2026)[92]

The State of the Highlands Report specifically calls for:

1. Provision of Land Management Funding, to address permanent land preservation, improved land stewardship practices, and ecological restoration; and
2. Financial Support for Highlands Municipalities, to mitigate the limits that the Highlands Act places on future development.[93]

The funding mix needed to protect a parcel varies by location. A diverse funding stack that combines federal, regional, state, local, and/or private funding promotes project stability, reducing reliance on any single source of funding.

Despite the Highlands RMP and Act emphasizing the importance of and need for land management programs and land conservation in the region, the Highlands Council has no source of funding to support such efforts. This lack of funding conflicts with the directive of the Highlands Act, which is to be able to preserve land.

As a result, this has rendered the Highlands Council largely unable to meet its mission and serve its purpose in terms of landowner equity and preserving valuable resources from incompatible development patterns. At present, the only preservation projects that move forward are those that leverage Federal Highlands Conservation Act (HCA) funding, often in partnership with other agencies. While the mission of the Act is to engage in land preservation, there is simply no funding to do so.

Importantly, the Highlands Open Space Program allows for the preservation of parcels of varying sizes, unlike some other popular land preservation programs such as the SADC and Green Acres programs. The lack of dedicated funding to the Highlands Council and Highlands Region is something that needs to be rectified, particularly in the context of the OSRP Plan.

To support preservation efforts, the Highlands Council identified local, regional, state, and federal funding sources that can be used to protect open space, outdoor recreation lands, and agricultural lands in the region.

Local Funding for Parks and Conservation in New Jersey

Most funding for parks and land conservation in the United States comes from local governments. A dedicated local funding source often serves as the foundation for long-term efforts to conserve and maintain land and water and is key to leveraging grants offered by state and federal programs.

"Dedicated funding" refers to any consistent and stable funding stream used for land acquisition and operations, programming, and maintenance for open space, parks, wildlife habitat, farmland, trails, and other recreational amenities whether that funding is in perpetuity or provided with sunset provisions.

Generally, local governments rely on three primary revenue sources to pay for parks and land conservation: discretionary annual spending through budget appropriations, dedicated funding streams such as voter-approved special taxes, and the issuance of bonds. The financing tools utilized by a community will depend on factors such as taxing capacity, budgetary resources, voter preferences, and political will. While most local governments can allocate funding for parks and recreation through their budgetary process, this happens infrequently and/or does not yield adequate funding.

Local governments that establish funding through ballot measures generally provide substantially more funding than those relying solely on annual budget appropriations. As elected officials balance competing budget priorities, funding for land conservation often lags behind other public needs and in many cases is well below what voters would support. It is often quite difficult to raise taxes without an indisputable public mandate for the intended purpose.

Conservation finance ballot measures provide communities with a tangible way to implement a local government's vision. With their own funding, local governments are better positioned to secure scarce funding from state or federal governments or private philanthropic partners. A predictable funding source empowers municipalities, counties, or special districts to establish long-term conservation priorities that protect the most valuable resources, are geographically distributed, and otherwise meet important community goals and values.

Nationwide, local jurisdictions have used a range of public financing options to fund parks and open space, including general obligation bonds, local sales taxes, and property taxes. Less commonly used mechanisms include real estate transfer taxes, impact fees, and income taxes. The ability of local governments and special districts to establish dedicated funding sources depends upon state enabling authority.

Conservation finance measures are not appropriate for every community, nor are they always the most effective option given specific political and economic climates. Budget appropriations and other revenue mechanisms that can be

implemented by the local government, such as impact fees, may well serve as short-term funding options while parks and conservation proponents develop a strategy and cultivate broad support for longer-term, dedicated financing options.

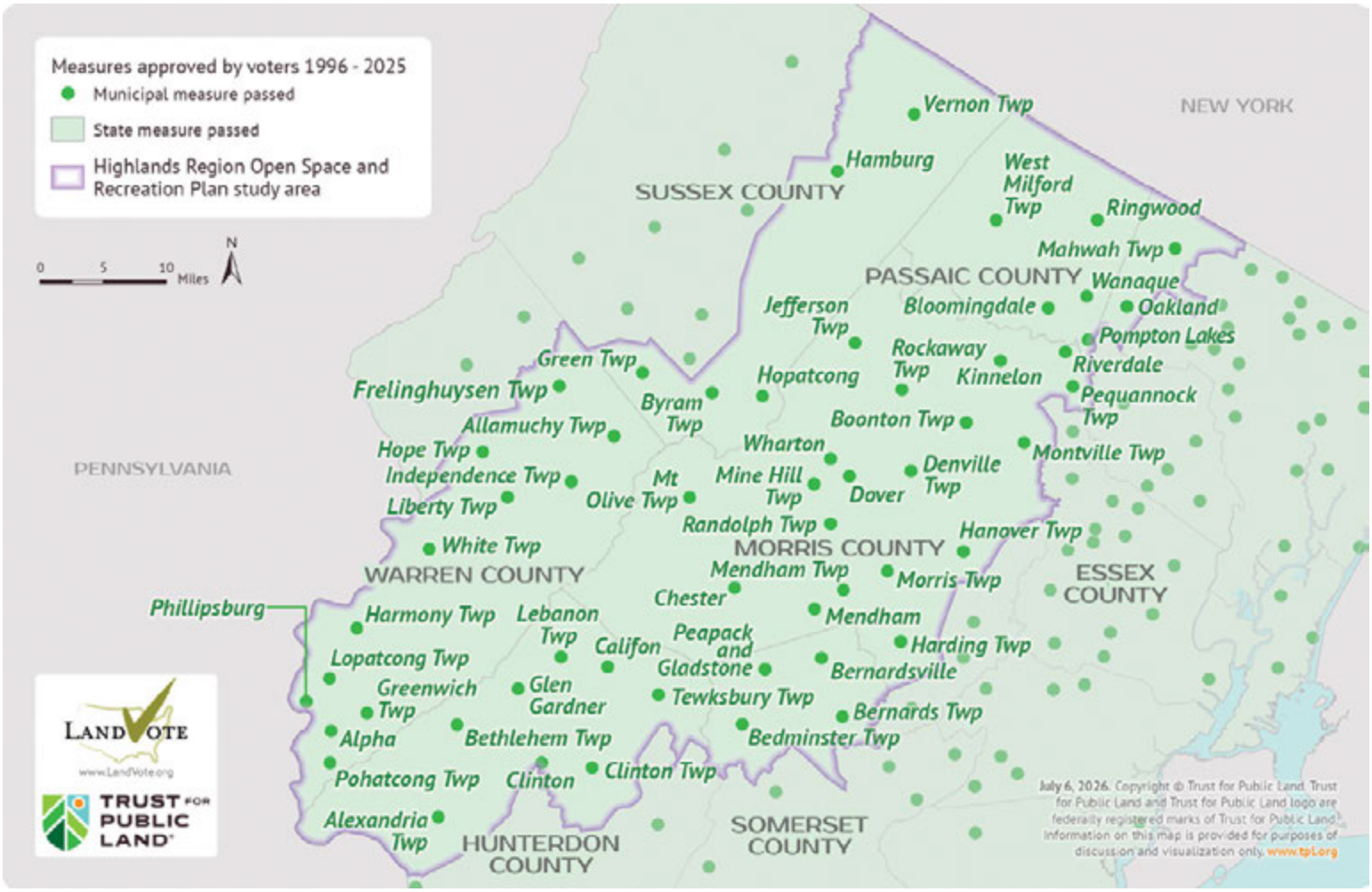
The State of New Jersey authorizes communities to use several revenue sources for open space, parks, and recreation purposes including property taxes and general obligation bonds. (Appendix D lists the New Jersey Open Space Tax Law and Definitions.) These funding mechanisms require approval by the electorate. Since 1996, New Jersey voters have approved 472 of 601 state and local funding measures for parks and open space, representing a 77% approval rate (see Appendix D).

In 1989, the New Jersey legislature enacted legislation authorizing counties and municipalities to establish a voter-approved Open Space Trust Fund supported by property taxes and provided for matching funds. Since then, all 21 counties and more than 250 municipalities in the state have established an open space tax by voter referendum.

PROPERTY TAX (OPEN SPACE TAX)

The primary way for local governments in New Jersey to create funding for an ongoing land conservation effort is through a voter-approved dedicated property tax, commonly referred to as the "open space tax". State enabling legislation (approved in 1989 and amended in 1997) permits counties and municipalities to levy an open space tax after voters approve a ballot question referred to by the governing body.[94] The ballot question may be submitted at a general or special election. The law was further amended in 2012 to allow the use of county and municipal open space trust funds for the purchase of flood-prone properties.

The tax may be levied at any amount, although ballot questions commonly specify a maximum (i.e., "up to 2 cents per hundred dollars of assessed value"). Once approved by a majority of voters, a county may annually raise property taxes up to the amount authorized in the ballot measure. Unless specified, the authority to levy the tax continues indefinitely,



although a sunset provision can be included ("not to exceed ten years," for example). Since 1996, 120 measures have included a sunset provision, most commonly ranging from five to 10 years.

Ballot questions must spell out the purposes for which the funds can be allocated. The question can include one or several of the following purposes:

- acquisition of lands for recreation and conservation purposes;
- development of lands acquired for recreation and conservation purposes;
- maintenance of lands acquired for recreation and conservation purposes;
- acquisition of farmland for farmland preservation purposes;
- historic preservation of historic properties, structures, facilities, sites, areas, or objects, and the acquisition of such properties, structures, facilities, sites, areas, or objects for historic preservation purposes;
- payment of debt service on indebtedness issued or incurred by a municipality for any of the purposes set forth above; and
- Blue Acres projects.[95]

The ballot question may also specify how annual revenues are allocated among these purposes. If allocations are not defined, the governing body may determine funding distribution following at least one public hearing. Subsequent ballot questions can amend tax levels, the purposes, or the allocation.

After approval by a majority of voters, the governing body must establish an "Open Space, Recreation, and Farmland and Historic Preservation Trust Fund" for the purposes of depositing the tax proceeds from the open space levy. Counties may make grants to municipalities and nonprofit land conservation groups.

At present, all 21 of New Jersey's counties and more than 250 municipalities have established voter-approved open space taxes.

In the Highlands Region, 55 municipalities—more than 62% of communities in the region—have a current open space fund. Additional opportunities for local open space funds likely exist, but many municipalities have yet to put the question to their voters. This may be driven by the amount of existing preserved lands in the community, out of concern for anti-tax sentiment, managing competing budget priorities, or reliance on existing funding streams (like county-level open space programs or state sources like Green Acres).

Counties may spend money from their trust funds for the specific purposes outlined, without subsequent votes of the people at an election.

Through the Green Acres Program, matching grant ratios differ depending on the type of community and the type of project (acquisition vs. park development). For local governments, there are different funding scenarios depending on the type of project, the population density of the community, and whether an open space tax has been implemented. Open space taxes should be maintained to be eligible for the higher match amounts and increase the total amount of funding available for parks and conservation.

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Examples of Successful Ballot Language in New Jersey

Jurisdiction	**Phillipsburg, Warren County**
Election Date	**November 7, 2017**
Ballot language	**Shall the Town of Phillipsburg establish an Open Space and Recreation Fund through an annual levy of .02 per $100 of assessed real property value for a period not to exceed five years, for the purposes of improving recreational facilities; protecting water quality in rivers and streams; historic preservation; conserving natural areas; and developing, maintaining and acquiring lands for recreation and conservation in the Town of Phillipsburg only; with spending based on the recommendations of a citizens oversight committee and full public disclosure?**
Results	**Property tax passed 55% yes**
Jurisdiction	**New Brunswick, NJ (Middlesex County)**
Election Date	**November 5, 2019**
Ballot language	**CITY OF NEW BRUNSWICK OPEN SPACE TRUST FUND** **Shall the City of New Brunswick establish an Open Space Trust Fund to be funded through an annual levy of one cent per $100 of assessed valuation of real property for the purposes of acquiring, developing, and preserving lands for recreation and conservation, including protecting the water quality of rivers and streams; preserving open space to protect from floods and protecting the Raritan River; providing safe, clean, and accessible parks, repairing and improving existing parks; creating neighborhood playgrounds and playfields for youth sports; and for the payment of any debt service or indebtedness issued or incurred by the City for these purposes, subject to full public disclosure and review of all expenditures and a public audit every year?** **INTERPRETIVE STATEMENT** **A "yes" vote will permit, but not require, the City of New Brunswick to establish an Open Space Trust Fund with an annual levy of up to one cent per $100 of assessed real property value to acquire, develop, and preserve lands for recreation and conservation, including to protect the water quality of rivers and streams like the Raritan River, preserve open space to protect from floods, provide safe, clean, and accessible parks, repair and improve existing parks, and create neighborhood playgrounds and playfields for youth sports. The levy would cost the average homeowner in New Brunswick $27 per year, which is equal to $2.25 per month. Moneys raised for the Open Space Trust Fund would only be used strictly for recreation, open space, park and conservation projects. There would be full public disclosure and review of all open space trust fund spending. Every year there would be a public audit of all expenditures.**
Results	**Property tax passed 76% yes**

State Funding for Parks and Conservation in New Jersey

New Jersey has historically been a national leader in long-term dedicated statewide funding for land conservation. Most recently, in November 2014, 65% of New Jersey voters approved a constitutional amendment dedicating $2.15 billion over 20 years to state land conservation programs, including Green Acres, using a portion of corporate business taxes collected by the state. The measure increased the share of corporate business tax revenues for environmental programs to 6% by 2019. This was not a tax increase, it reallocated funds that were destined for water programs, underground storage tanks, and hazardous site cleanups and dedicated them to open space, farmland, and historic preservation.

OVERVIEW

Prior to 2014, New Jersey voters had approved 13 consecutive bonds for land conservation dating back to 1961.

From 1961 to 1995, voters overwhelmingly approved nine state bond issues that generated more than $1.4 billion for parkland, opens space, and farmland acquisition. Voters also approved four measures between 1998 and 2009 (described below).

In 1998, voters approved a constitutional amendment that created a stable source of funding to acquire and preserve open space, farmland, and historic sites statewide. This voter approval and subsequent Garden State Preservation Trust Act in 1999 established the Garden State Preservation Trust and dedicated funding for conservation and historic preservation from existing state sales and use tax revenue. It also authorized the issuance of up to $1 billion in revenue bonds. This legislation dedicated funding for 30 years, although funding was split into two parts.

From fiscal year 2000 through fiscal year 2009, the Trust received $98 million annually for land conservation and historic preservation projects. Acquisition projects ended in 2009 under this authorization. From fiscal year 2010 through fiscal year 2029, the Trust receives an amount sufficient to repay the debt service on the open space bonds, up to a maximum of $98 million. The annual difference between the necessary debt service and $98 million goes to the general fund.

The Act set a $200 million annual limit for open space and farmland preservation. It also set a formula for the distribution of revenue. Each year, the Trust must allocate $6 million to the Historic Preservation Trust. Of the remaining proceeds, 60% goes to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's Green Acres open space preservation program, and 40% goes to the New Jersey State Agriculture Development Committee's Farmland Preservation program. The Act also continues the payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT) program, which makes payments to municipality in which lands are purchased under the Green Acres program.

In 2003, voters approved a $150 million increase in the bonding authority cap, from $1 billion to $1.15 billion. Debt service on bonds issued under this authorization is paid using the dedicated funds in the Garden State Preservation Trust. This funding was earmarked for acquisition of open space in the state's Highlands Region and for creating and improving 200 local parks.

During this time, Governor McGreevey made protecting open space and drinking water in the New Jersey Highlands a top priority. In his State of the State address, the Governor promised to "take bold steps to preserve that area which supplies drinking water to half of New Jersey's families." Those bold steps include committing at least $50 million of the additional Garden State Preservation Trust (GSPT) funding to land preservation in the Highlands. Each municipality and nonprofit organization acquiring land in the Highlands would receive an additional $175,000 in funding for those purchases, while counties would receive an additional $250,000 for purchases in the Highlands. Green Acres also dedicated $25 million towards direct State land acquisition as part of Governor McGreevey's commitment to protect the region's precious natural resources. Funding recommendations for acquisition projects in the Highlands total $55,495,500, including $23,770,500 for local projects; $6,725,000 for nonprofit projects; and $25,000,000 for State projects.[96]

In 2007, voters approved a ballot measure that authorized the issuance of $200 million for open space acquisition, farmland preservation, and historic preservation. The measure also authorized a new program, known as "Blue Acres," to acquire conservation land in flood-prone areas.

In 2009, voters approved a ballot measure that authorized the issuance of $400 million in general obligation bonds for open space and recreation land acquisition and development, acquisition of flood-prone conservation land, farmland preservation, and historic preservation.

New Jersey Garden State Preservation Trust

The Garden State Preservation Trust distributes funds to four programs:

1. the Green Acres Program,
2. the Farmland Preservation Program,
3. the New Jersey Historic Trust, and
4. the Blue Acres Program.

These programs have received consistent support from New Jersey voters, who have approved 13 statewide ballot measures since the Green Acres program was created in 1961. The Farmland Preservation program was established in 1983 while the New Jersey Historic Trust was established in 1967.

The Blue Acres Program, which is managed under the Green Acres program, was created in 2007. The program is a voluntary, state-led initiative run by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) that purchases flood-prone residential properties from homeowners in the Delaware, Raritan, and Passaic Rivers watersheds that purchases flood-prone residential properties from homeowners in New Jersey. Because Blue Acres leverages both federal and state funding sources to facilitate flood buyouts, geography may be limited by the funding source.

Properties (including structures) that have been damaged—or may be prone to future damage—by storms or storm-related flooding, or that may buffer or protect other lands from such damage, are eligible for acquisition under Blue Acres. State funding is often leveraged with federal funds from FEMA and the NRCS.

New Jersey's Green Acres Program, nearing its 65th anniversary in 2026, is among the most successful state preservation programs in the nation. Since 1961, Green Acres has preserved more than 725,000 acres of land and supported the development of more than 1,200 state and local parks.

The program funds direct acquisitions by the state from willing sellers and supports:

- municipal and county land acquisition,
- local development of parks and recreation facilities,
- acquisition projects by nonprofit organizations, and
- recreation development by nonprofits through low-interest loans and grants.

Through the Green Acres Program, local governments have the following options:

- 25% matching grants are available to local governments that do not have an open space tax
- 50% matching grants are available to local governments that have an open space tax

The NJ DEP Office of Natural Resource Restoration's Natural Resources Damage program compensates the public for injuries to natural resources including all land, fish, shellfish, wildlife, biota, air, waters, and others due to the release of hazardous substances. This may include land preservation, monetary compensation, or restoration projects.[97]



Fox Hill Preserve, Tewksbury Township, Hunterdon County (Raritan Headwaters)

The multi-state **Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI)** is a cooperate effort among Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic states, including New Jersey, to reduce greenhouse emissions through a cap-and-invest program. States put a price on carbon emissions from power plants, and invest the funds into projects that reduce climate change, including NJDEP programs.

Under RGGI, NJDEP funding could be dedicated to projects and programs that:

- support projects that create, restore, and enhance New Jersey's green carbon sinks, such as afforestation, reforestation, and urban forestry projects Natural Climate Solutions Grant Program;
- support tree planting projects at public schools through the Trees for Schools Grant Program;
- develop and implement natural resources plans for State-owned lands, which could include forest and reforestation projects for Atlantic White Cedar, Oak Species, Eastern Hemlock, and Shortleaf Pine;
- support the existing New Jersey Urban and Community Forestry Program;
- enable the development of Forest Stewardship Plans for private landowners; and
- support projects that implement agroforestry and/or other climate-smart mitigation activities that improve carbon sequestration in perennial biomass, trees, and soils.

And NJ Economic Development Authority (NJEDA) funding could be dedicated to establishing new projects and programs that:

- support urban park development and green space through restoring and replanting existing parks in need of revitalization, focusing on tree planting and promoting alternative low-carbon construction materials where appropriate;
- construct new dedicated community green spaces as part of larger real estate development work; and
- repurpose unused infrastructure or other underutilized assets into recreational parkland or natural reserves, such as transforming brownfield sites, supporting rail-to-trail developments, and similar projects.[98]

New Jersey Farmland Preservation Program: The New Jersey State Agricultural Development Committee (SADC) administers the New Jersey Farmland Preservation Program. It provides grants to counties, municipalities, and nonprofit groups to fund the purchase of development easements on farmland. It also directly purchases farms and development easements from landowners.

Landowners can either sell the development rights to their land and continue to farm it or sell the land outright. The land is permanently restricted for agricultural use. When the SADC purchases farms outright, it resells them at public auction as permanently preserved farms.

The SADC provides additional funding to counties and municipalities to preserve farmland through the County Planning Incentive Grant and Municipal Planning Incentive Grant programs. Counties may seek funding from the state for up to 60-80% of the costs of purchasing development rights on approved farms.

The SADC provides grants to nonprofit organizations to fund up to 50% of the fee simple or development easement values on farms to ensure their permanent preservation.

The SADC also manages an Eight-Year Preservation program, where farmland owners voluntarily agree to restrict non-agricultural development for a period of eight years for



Chester Township, Morris County (NJ Farm Bureau)

certain benefits such as the eligibility to apply for grants to fund up to 50% of certain soil and water conservation projects.

The New Jersey Historic Trust is an independent agency that advances historic preservation in New Jersey. The trust administers a number of funding programs for preservation projects such as the repair, restoration, rehabilitation planning, and improvement of historic properties. These include the Preserve New Jersey Historic Preservation Fund, the Garden State Historic Preservation Trust Fund, the Cultural Trust Capital Preservation Grant Program, the 1772 Foundation, the Discover NJ History License Plate Fund for Heritage Tourism, the Revolving Loan Fund, and the Emergency Grant and Loan Fund. The program also accepts perpetual easements to provide for long-term preservation of a historical resource.

The New Jersey Environmental Infrastructure Financing Program commonly known as the New Jersey Water Bank: The New Jersey Environmental Infrastructure Financing Program (EIFP) is a revolving loan program administered by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the New Jersey Environmental Infrastructure Trust, an independent state financing authority. Established by the Legislature in 1986, the program is the first of its kind in the country and offers local governments and some private water companies low-cost financing for wastewater systems, combined sewer overflow abatement, nonpoint source pollution control, safe drinking water supplies, and open space acquisition. To date, the program has provided more than $11 billion to municipal and county governments, as well as to private water companies.

Open space acquisition projects are eligible for the Smart Growth Financing Package, where the Department of Environmental Protection funds 75% of the project cost at 0% interest and 25% of the project costs are funded by the Environmental Infrastructure Trust at market rates.

Hazardous Discharge Site Remediation Fund: DEP's Office of Brownfield and Community Revitalization administers the Hazardous Discharge Site Remediation Fund which provides grants to public entities to conduct assessment and remediation of hazardous substances and waste at brownfield sites. Under NJ state law (N.J.S.A 58:10B-23.d), brownfields are defined as "any former or current commercial or industrial site that is currently vacant or underutilized and on which there has been, or there is suspected to have been, a discharge of a contaminant." Grant funding covers 100% of assessment/investigation costs and up to 75% of remedial action costs for sites in designated Brownfield Development Areas (BDAs). The program also provides loans and 25% grants to private entities for investigation and cleanup of hazardous substances or waste program-wide.

Public entities (including municipalities, counties, and redevelopment authorities) are eligible if they hold a tax sale certificate, have acquired a property through foreclosure, or have passed a resolution indicating intent to acquire a property. Private entities with a net worth under $2 million may qualify for 25% remedial action grants or loans if conventional financing is unavailable.

Bikeway Grant Program: New Jersey Department of Transport (NJDOT) administers the Bikeway Grant Program, which is an annual grant program that provides ~$1 million to fund bicycle projects which create new Bike Path Mileage. The program was founded in 2006 as part of the larger Pedestrian Safety Initiative. A major objective of the Bikeway Grant Program is to support the state's goal of constructing 1,000 new miles of dedicated bike paths. Bikeways are required to be physically separated from motorized vehicular traffic by an open space or barrier.

This program is available to every municipality and county throughout New Jersey. Special consideration will be given if the project is part of a bicycle network that has been adopted in the applicant's Master Plan. Bike projects must place no restrictions upon hours of use by bicyclists. Projects considered for funding under other State Aid and Federal Aid programs are not eligible.

Safe Streets to Transit: Safe Streets to Transit is another NJDOT Pedestrian Safety Initiative. Similarly to the Bikeway Grant Program, which sought to improve safety and accessibility for bike riders, the Safe Streets to Transit Grant Program aims to improve the overall safety and accessibility for mass transit riders walking to transit facilities and encourage mass transit users to walk to transit stations. The program funds infrastructure improvements such as new sidewalks, curb ramps, pedestrian signals, traffic calming measures, and other intersection safety improvements. These improvements must be constructed within one half mile of transit facilities.

Counties and municipalities are eligible to apply, with each entity permitted to submit one application annually. Priority consideration is given to projects serving targeted urban municipalities, equity populations, and communities that have adopted Complete Streets resolutions.

Local Recreation Improvement Grant: Department of Community Affairs: The Local Recreation Improvement Grant supports improvements and repairs for public school recreational facilities including local parks, municipal recreation centers, and local stadiums. Grant funds will be allocated to each grant recipient to help cover costs associated with updating community centers, playgrounds, pools, fields, walking or bicycle trails, rail trails, multi-sport courts, and recreational facilities; project development professional services costs; equipment costs including playground and recreation facilities equipment; and environmental remediation costs required to prepare recreation sites for use. New Jersey counties, municipalities, and school districts are eligible to apply with priority given to underserved populations and those that include a local match component.

Regional Funding for Preservation

There are funding opportunities available specifically for communities in the Highlands Region:

Highlands Open Space Partnership Funding Program: The Highlands Open Space Partnership Funding Program is a matching grant program designed to support conservation projects for the protection of resources within the Highlands Region, and to further the land preservation goals of the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act and the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP). The New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council (Highlands Council) operates this program, and applications are accepted on a rolling basis.

Eligible projects include the acquisition of land for conservation and/or passive recreation, and the acquisition of conservation easements for conservation purposes. Such easements may restrict future development and protect uses including, but not limited to, parkland, natural areas, greenways, farmland, and other natural resources identified in the RMP. Unlike other state programs, the Highlands Open Space Grant Program does not have restrictions on property size, or other factors that other programs may have.

Highlands Open Space Partnership & Highlands Development Credit Purchase Programs: The Highlands Act established a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program for the region. To implement the TDR program, the RMP created the Highlands Development Credit (HDC) program, and the Council established the HDC Bank to manage the TDR transactions. Beginning in 2012, the HDC Bank began to make purchases of TDR credits to address issues of land equity in alignment with the RMP's goals. In 2016 the Highlands Council recognized the need to further formalize the HDC purchases and established a program for general open space purchases in the region. The Council adopted N.J.A.C. 7:70 creating the Open Space Partnership Program and the HDC Purchase Program.

The Open Space Partnership Program has preserved 3,648 acres to date. The Highlands Council has contributed $6,413,776, leveraging additional funding in the amount of $9,838,872 between 2017 and 2025.[99] Highlands Council funding came from both mitigation funds and the federal Highalnds Conservation Act, with matching funding coming from state and other private and non-profit sources.

The HDC Purchase Program is used for the purchase of Highlands Development Credits. Properties have a conservation or agricultural preservation easement placed on them in return for the credits. The HDC Bank then purchases the credits from the property owner. A registry of the properties that have placed easements on them is available on the Highlands Council's website. Purchases are limited to the preservation area. In total the Highalnds Development Credit Bank has spent $27,772,000 preserving 2,565 acres in the region. Approximately $37 million in applications have been reviewed and are pending potential purchase should funding be made available.

The Highlands Open Space Partnership Program and the HDC Purchase Program rule (N.J.A.C. 7:70) established priority criteria for projects. Those priority criteria are based on the RMP and the 2008 Land Preservation and Stewardship technical report. Changes in priorities adopted in this report will likely require updates to N.J.A.C. 7:70.

Federal Funding for Parks and Conservation in New Jersey

Through a variety of conservation programs, the federal government has long been an important partner for state and local governments, parks and conservation organizations, and community advocates.

The following section highlights the federal conservation programs that have been or are more likely to provide funding to New Jersey for land protection.

U.S. Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE:

Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) – Stateside Grants

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) is the largest source of federal money for parks, wildlife, and open space. Specifically, LWCF provides funding to assist in the acquisition, renovation, preservation, and development of outdoor recreation resources, including but not limited to: open space, parks, trails, wildlife lands and other lands, and facilities desirable for outdoor active participation. Under the LWCF Stateside Program, a portion of LWCF funds is directed to states through formula grants for land protection and park development projects. Program details and prioritization of projects are highly variable from state to state, allowing flexibility in the allocation of funds.

Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) – Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP)

ORLP is a nationally competitive grant program that delivers funding to urban, low-income communities of at least 25,000 people and federally recognized tribes. These awards help low-income communities address outdoor recreation deficits by supporting projects that create new outdoor recreation spaces, renovate or expand existing parks, and foster connections between people and the outdoors. The next round of funding will have $125 million available, distributed in grants ranging in size from $300,000 to $15 million.

Because of the ORLP population eligibility requirements, a limited number of communities in the Highlands Region would be able to apply (e.g., Mahwah, Mount Olive, Parsippany-Troy Hills, Randolph, Rockaway, and Bernards, based on the demographic data in the March 2025 New Jersey Highlands Regional Fact Book).

U.S. Department of Agriculture

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE:

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) provides financial and technical assistance to help conserve agricultural lands and wetlands and their related benefits. Under the Agricultural Land Easements component, NRCS helps Tribes, state and local governments, and non-governmental organizations administer the program to protect working agricultural lands and limit non-agricultural uses. Eligible land for agricultural easements includes cropland, rangeland, grassland, pastureland, and nonindustrial private forest land. NRCS may contribute up to 50% of the fair market value of the agricultural land easement. Under the Wetlands Reserve Easements component, NRCS helps to restore, protect, and enhance enrolled wetlands by covering up to 100% of the cost to restore.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife

HIGHLANDS CONSERVATION ACT PROGRAM

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service administers the Highlands Conservation Act Program (HCA) to assist Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania in the protection of land and natural resources in the Highlands Region. HCA grants support land conservation projects in which a state, county, or municipal entity acquires land or an interest in land from a willing seller to conserve resources of high conservation value. Typically, two separate grant categories are awarded annually: base funding and competitive funding grants. Each state is awarded a set amount in base funding, whereas competitive funding is awarded based on a set of criteria, preserving the properties with the most resources/benefits. The HCA grant is a matching grant program requiring a 1:1 cost share or a minimum 50% non-federal match.

Since passage of the Highlands Conservation Act in 2004, $52 million in federal funds, matched by $79 million in non-federal funds, have been awarded to permanently protect more than 19,000 acres of land across the four states. Projects supported by the Highlands Conservation Act grant program are led by state agencies. The Highlands Council is the Lead State Agency for New Jersey and is the only eligible applicant for funding.

U.S. Forest Service

Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) – Forest Legacy Program

The Forest Legacy Program (FLP) is administered in partnership with state agencies to encourage the protection of privately owned forest lands through conservation easements or land purchases. Protection of private forests through the FLP is meant to maintain public benefits to surrounding communities including:

- opportunities to hunt, fish, and camp;
- clean and abundant drinking water;
- habitat for fish and wildlife; and
- timber, fuel wood, and other forest products.

Proposals must demonstrate these public benefits by responding to three considerations of successful projects. This includes the importance of the land ecologically, culturally, or economically; the development pressure the forest area is under; the strategic value of the tract of land to the larger landscape; and regional priorities.

Community Forest and Open Space Program

The USFS Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program (also known as the Community Forest Program, or CFP) provides competitive grants to local governments, tribal governments, and qualified nonprofit organizations to acquire and permanently conserve private forestland for public benefit. The program supports the protection of working forests and open spaces that provide environmental, economic, and community benefits, while ensuring long-term public access for recreation, education, and stewardship. Community forests acquired through the program remain locally owned and managed, helping communities preserve natural resources while maintaining control over their future use.[100]

For small communities in New Jersey, the Community Forest Program can be a valuable tool for protecting remaining forested lands in the face of development pressure, improving access to outdoor recreation, safeguarding drinking water resources, reducing flooding and urban heat impacts, and preserving local character. The program can help municipalities secure funding to acquire strategically important properties that might otherwise be lost to development, while creating new opportunities for trails, environmental education, community gathering spaces, and nature-based economic development. As many small New Jersey communities seek to balance growth with conservation and resilience goals, the Community Forest Program offers a pathway to achieve lasting environmental and community benefits through local ownership and stewardship of forested open space.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)

The Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program is a flexible program that provides communities with resources to address a wide range of unique community development needs. In addition to addressing affordable housing needs, CDBG funds can be used for constructing and improving public infrastructure, providing public services, activities related to energy conservation and renewable energy resources, and providing economic development. Projects must either benefit low- and moderate-income persons or address urgent community development needs because existing conditions pose a serious and immediate threat to the health or welfare of the community for which other funding is not available.

U.S. Department of Transportation

FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION:
Transportation Alternatives Program

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law continued the Transportation Alternatives set-aside from the Surface Transportation Block Grant (STBG) program. Eligible uses of the Transportation Alternatives funds include all projects and activities that were previously eligible under the Transportation Alternatives Program under the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21). This encompasses a variety of smaller-scale transportation projects such as pedestrian and bicycle

facilities, recreational trails, safe routes to school projects, community improvements such as historic preservation and vegetation management, and environmental mitigation related to stormwater and habitat connectivity. This program is administered at the state level by the New Jersey Department of Transportation and at the local level by rural counties and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) or Councils of Governments (COGs).

Recreational Trails Program

The Recreational Trails Program (RTP) is an assistance program of DOT's Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). FHWA provides funds to states to develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities for motorized and non-motorized recreational trail uses. NJDEP has been designated as the state agency responsible for administering this federal program in New Jersey, through the Green Acres program.

BUILD Grant Program

The grant program previously known as RAISE and TIGER has been renamed the Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) program. Grants are awarded to surface transportation infrastructure projects aimed at improving safety, quality of life, mobility and community connectivity, and economic competitiveness. Urban projects can receive between $5–25 million per grant while rural project grants range between $1–25 million.

Environmental Protection Agency

Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds (C/DWSRF)

The Environmental Protection Agency is charged with implementing both the Clean Water Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act, two landmark pieces of legislation whose respective goals are to clean up America's waterways and to ensure safe drinking water. Both the Clean and Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF & DWSRF) programs utilize "State Revolving Funds" (SRFs) to fund projects that improve water quality and enhance drinking water supplies. Conservation is an eligible activity under both the CWSRF and DWSRF programs, and the CWSRF can fund green infrastructure projects. Every year, Congress appropriates funds that are apportioned out to the states on a formula basis to fund the SRFs.

For New Jersey, the NJ Water Bank administers the Clean Water State Revolving Fund, and the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund is jointly administered by the NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJ DEP) and NJ Infrastructure Bank (NJIB).

Brownfields Program

If a property identified for acquisition or redevelopment is or might be a "brownfield" site, many programs and other benefits at the local, state, and federal levels encourage its redevelopment. The EPA defines brownfields as properties with which "the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant." The EPA's Brownfields Program provides direct funding to eligible entities for brownfields assessment, cleanup, revolving loans, and environmental job training. As an EPA priority, the Brownfields Program provides several types of grants and is flexible in allowing access and collaboration with other agency programs to ensure resources are available to the projects that need them most.

National Endowment for the Arts

NEA Grants for Arts Projects

The NEA's Grants for Arts Projects under the design category funds creative placemaking. Through project-based funding, the program supports activities that integrate arts, culture, and design into local efforts that strengthen communities. The Grants for Arts Projects advance local economic, physical, or social outcomes in communities, ultimately laying the groundwork for systems change and centering equity. Program funds have been utilized in many outdoor recreation settings, providing aesthetic, cultural, and practical installations to parks. These projects require one of the partners to be an arts and cultural organization. Grants range from $10,000 to $150,000, with a minimum 1:1 match.

Acquisition Outreach Toolkit

TWENTYTWENTY developed a Highlands Region Acquisition Outreach Toolkit that provides guidance for land use protection in the Highlands Region (see Appendix F). The toolkit should be used by land trusts, communities, and counties as a coordinated framework for preservation in the region. Key components include a recommended acquisition workflow, recommended outreach processes, and helpful resources for practitioners.



Alexandria Township, Hunterdon County
(Highlands Council)

Chapter 7.
Conclusion

Forested areas, farmland, and outdoor recreation spaces are essential to the health, resilience, and prosperity of Highlands Region communities. The region contains a remarkable network of forests, parks, farms, rivers, water bodies, and open spaces that provide critical environmental and economic benefits. These landscapes help protect drinking water supplies, reduce flooding, support biodiversity, and improve air quality, while also offering residents access to recreation and natural beauty close to home.

Protecting these natural resources is ultimately an investment in New Jersey's future. These lands provide essential ecological services, support economic growth, preserve the state's agricultural legacy, and improve the wellbeing of residents across urban, suburban, and rural communities alike.

Working farms and forest-based industries also contribute significantly to New Jersey's economy and cultural heritage. Agriculture remains an important economic driver across the state, supporting local jobs, food production, tourism, and small businesses. Preserved farmland helps sustain a reliable local food supply, strengthen regional food security, and maintain the rural character that defines many communities. Outdoor recreation generates substantial economic activity by attracting visitors and supporting local restaurants, outfitters, lodging, and retail businesses. Investments in outdoor recreation not only improve community vitality but also increase property values and enhance New Jersey's competitiveness as a place to live and work.

As development pressures and climate risks continue to grow, thoughtful land conservation and stewardship policies will remain critical tools for ensuring that the Highlands Region remains healthy, sustainable, and economically vibrant for generations to come. Conserving these landscapes is one of the most cost-effective ways New Jersey can adapt to changing climate conditions while protecting critical infrastructure and natural resources.

The Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) identified key priorities of Highlands stakeholders and residents through a comprehensive engagement process, with over 800 participants. Several themes consistently emerged across the regional goals, including:

- equitable access to the outdoors;
- protection of working lands from development;
- conservation of high-value natural resources, such as water supply areas and critical habitat;
- increased outdoor recreation and the benefits it provides, including stewarding existing resources; and
- connectivity between preserved areas, both to benefit wildlife and residents who wish to maintain the rural character of the region.

To elevate these regional priorities for preservation, the OSRP provides a framework for acquiring high-value open space and recreational opportunities. Implementation of the OSRP and this framework will facilitate a proactive and collaborative approach to land protection, ultimately helping balance conservation and development in the region by prioritizing parcels with high natural resource values.

The map-based analysis identified 9,567 parcels eligible for protection, including:

- 2,917 parcels that scored 7 or higher for open space;
- 2,327 parcels that scored 7 or higher for outdoor recreation; and
- 3,347 parcels that scored 7 or higher for agricultural or farmland preservation.

The highest scores (out of a possible 10) reflect parcels that are most closely aligned with regional goals based on map-based data. Land trusts and planners are encouraged to supplement the map-based analysis with site-specific evaluation questions to best understand the parcels' suitability; checklists are available in Chapter 4.

In addition to the parcel framework, the OSRP also provides key resources in response to community needs, including:

- survey data describing outdoor recreation uses and needs, which helps advocates raise awareness of the benefits of investment in open space and recreation;

- an inventory of recreational assets in the region and a level of service analysis that identifies community recreational needs;
- a parcel scoring analysis that aligns regional goals with place-based information on the potential benefits of open space, outdoor recreation, and agricultural preservation;
- an outreach toolkit and land preservation flowchart that guides land preservation organizations through the nuances of preservation processes in the Highlands region; and
- identification of funding sources to protect these critical parcels.

Open space and farmland are defining features of the Highlands Region and are highly valued by both residents and visitors. Protection of these resources has been and will remain a priority. Despite the protections established through the Highlands Act, the region continues to face development pressure on environmentally, agriculturally, and historically valuable lands. The Highlands Council will continue working to balance environmental protection and economic development by protecting sensitive sites while facilitating appropriate growth.

The OSRP provides resources and tools to ensure that preservation of open space, farmland, and recreation resources meets the needs of the region's diverse population, today and into the future.

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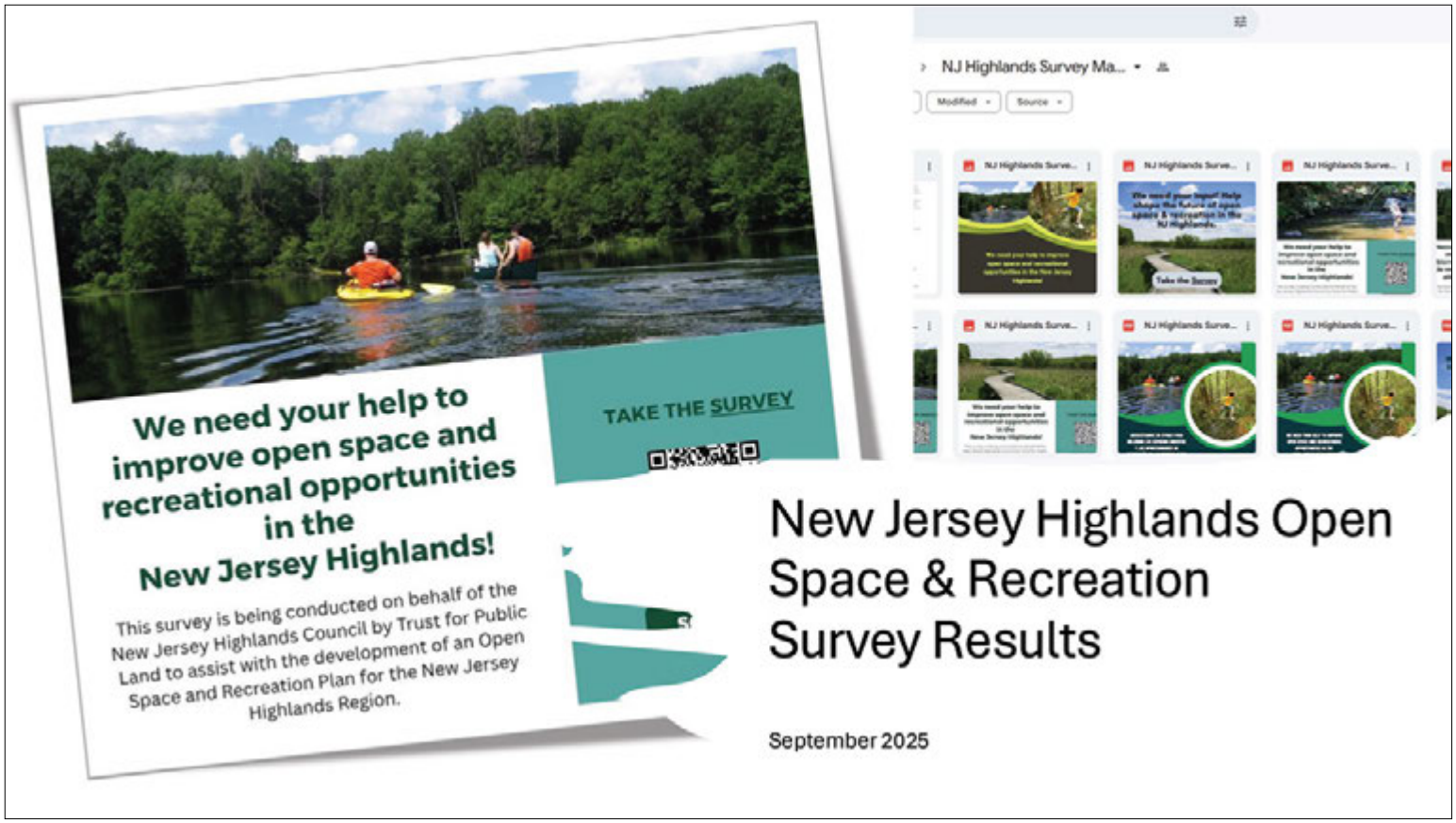
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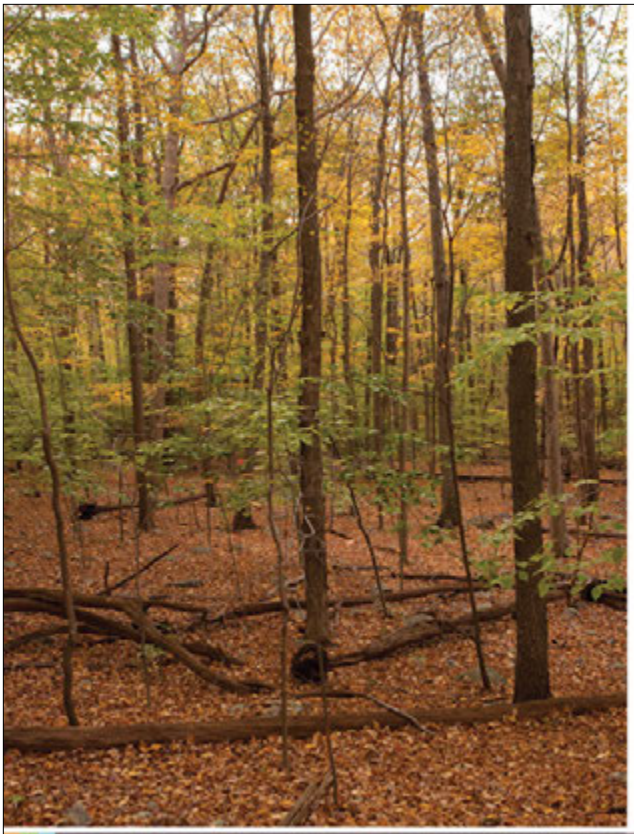
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Appendix A.

New Jersey Highlands Open Space & Recreation Survey Results





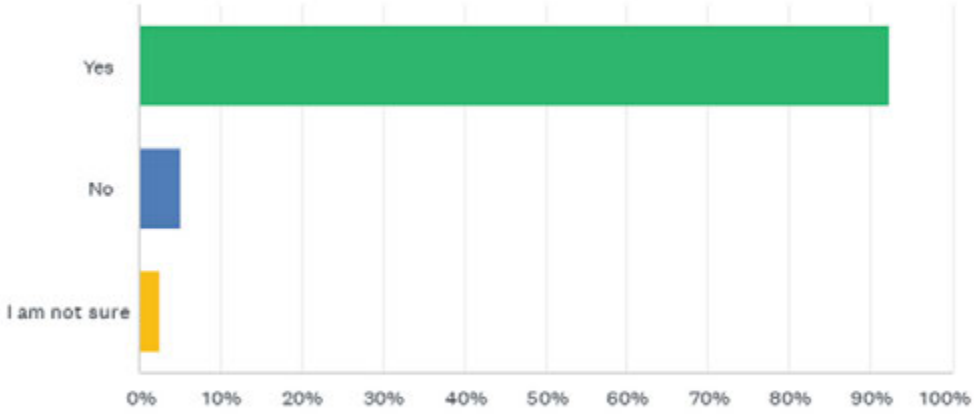
- Goals:
  - Identify patterns & trends in how open spaces in the Highlands Region are used by the public
  - Learn about any obstacles or challenges the public may encounter when trying to access open space and recreational opportunities
  - Assess the importance of acquiring and preserving open space for natural resource protection and for active recreational use
- General public survey was open to the public until August 31st
- Results: 737 responses in English, Pending # in Spanish
- Recognize the limitations of the survey results, given the budget and scope for the project.

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Q2: For the purposes of this survey "outdoor recreation" means any recreational activity done outside in a park, open space, or natural area. Examples could include birding, trail use, water-based recreation, fishing, hunting, or nature or cultural-based activities. **Have you participated in outdoor recreation in the Highlands Region of New Jersey?**

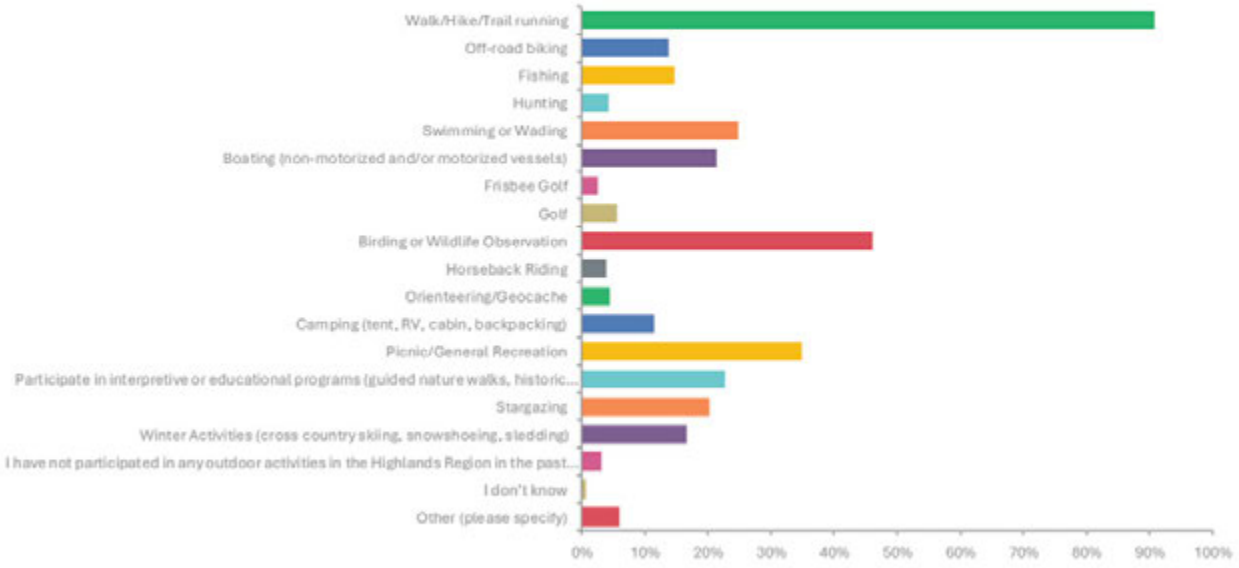


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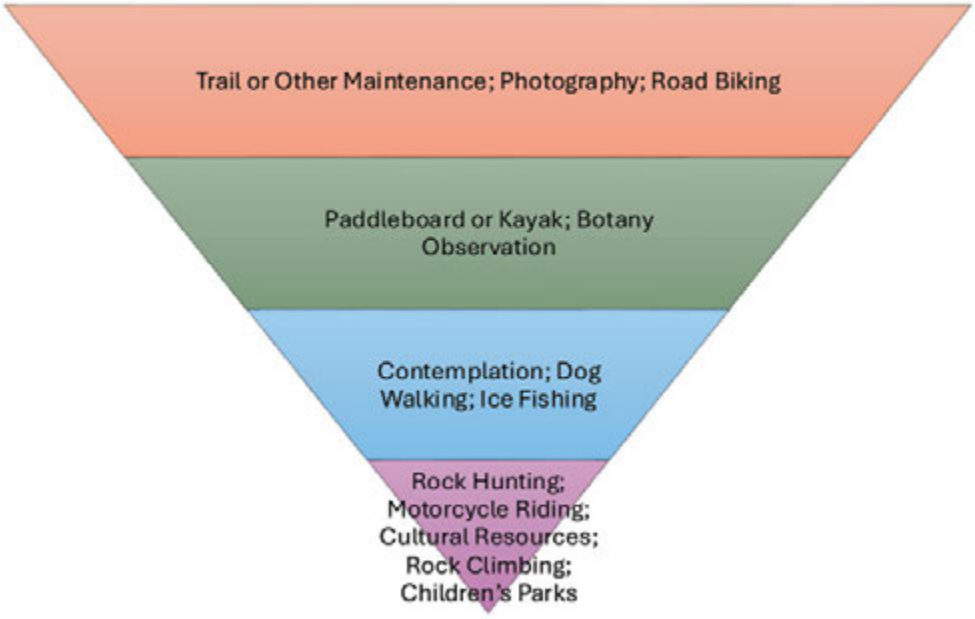
Q3: **Which of the following outdoor recreation activities have you done in the Highlands Region in the past 12 months?**



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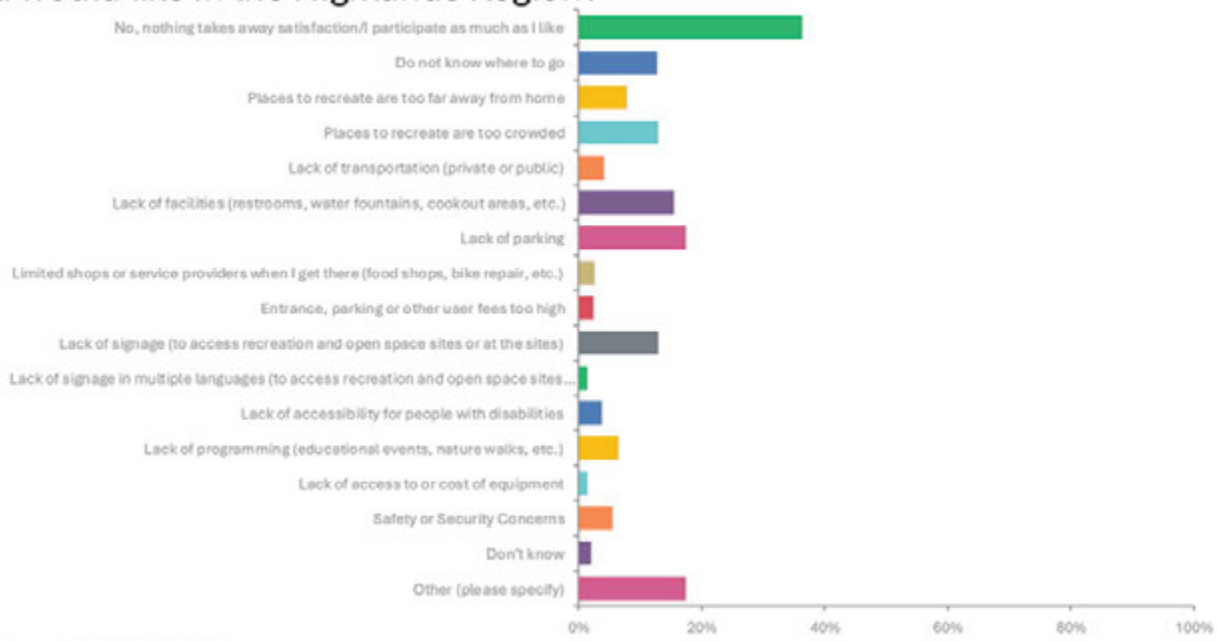
Q3: **Summary of "Other" responses**



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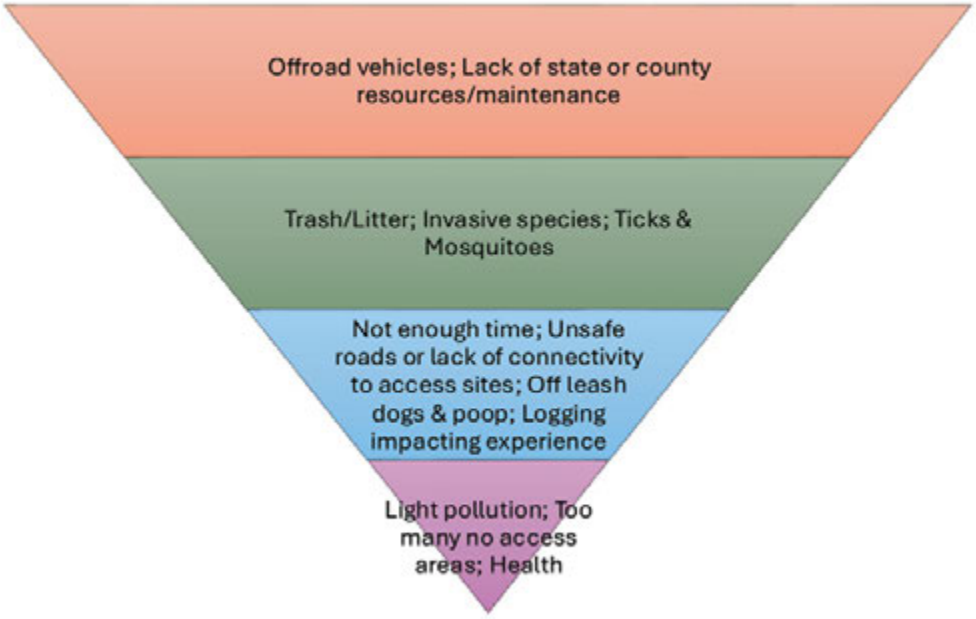
Q4: In general, are there **any things that take away from your satisfaction with outdoor recreation or cause you not to participate in outdoor recreation** as much as you would like in the Highlands Region?



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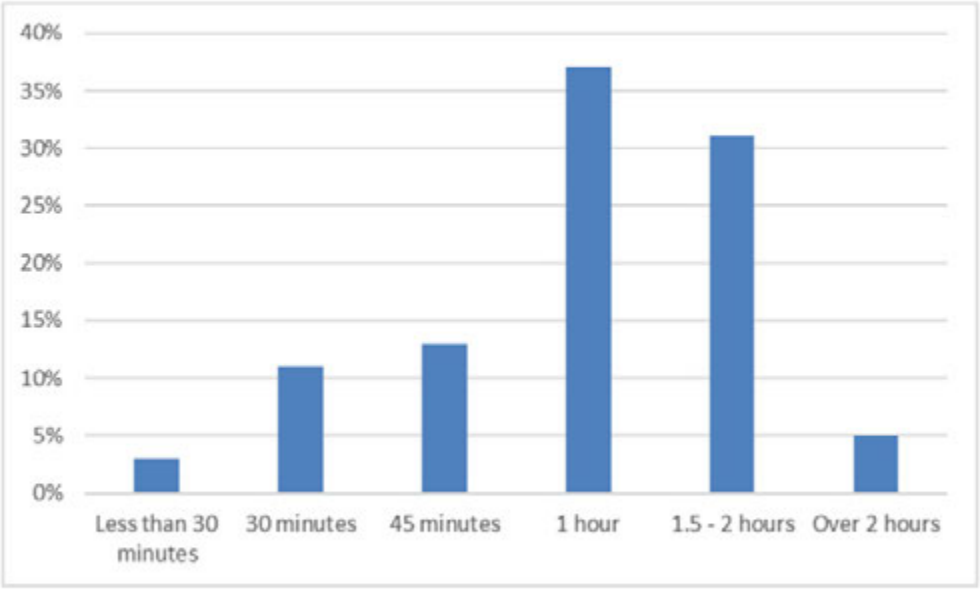
Q4: **Summary of "Other" responses.**



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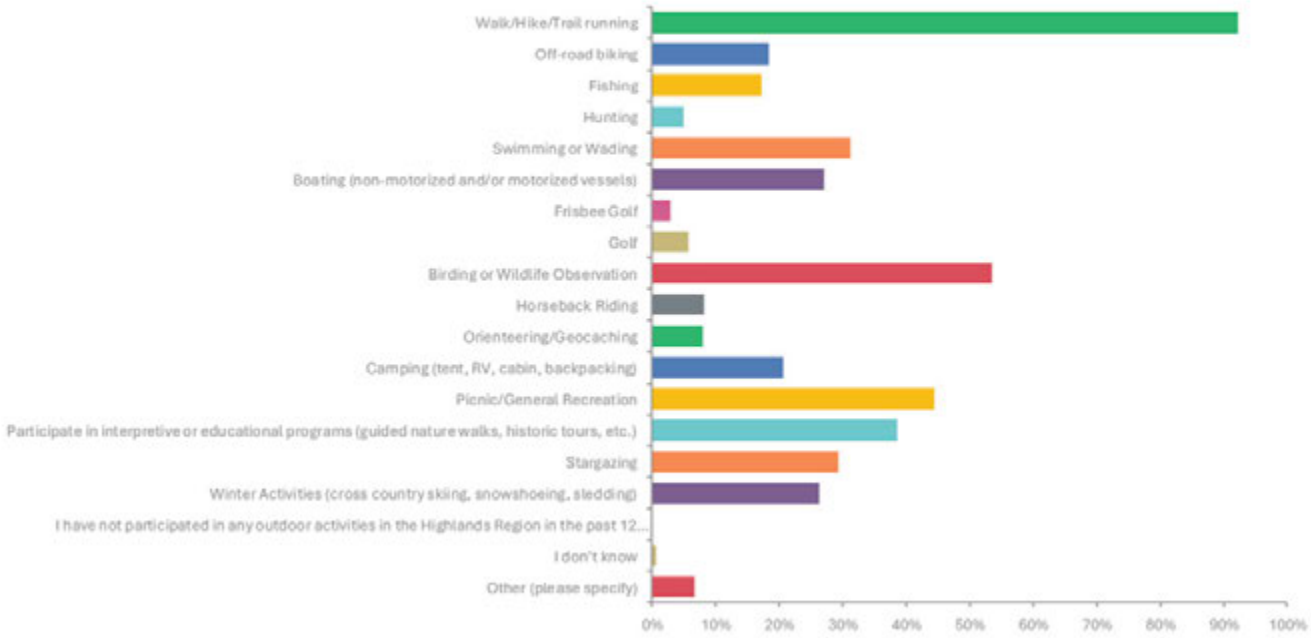
Q5: What is the **maximum amount of time you are willing to spend traveling** to access recreation opportunities in the New Jersey Highlands Region?



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Q6: Which of the following **outdoor recreation activities would you like to do in the Highlands Region in the next 12 months**?



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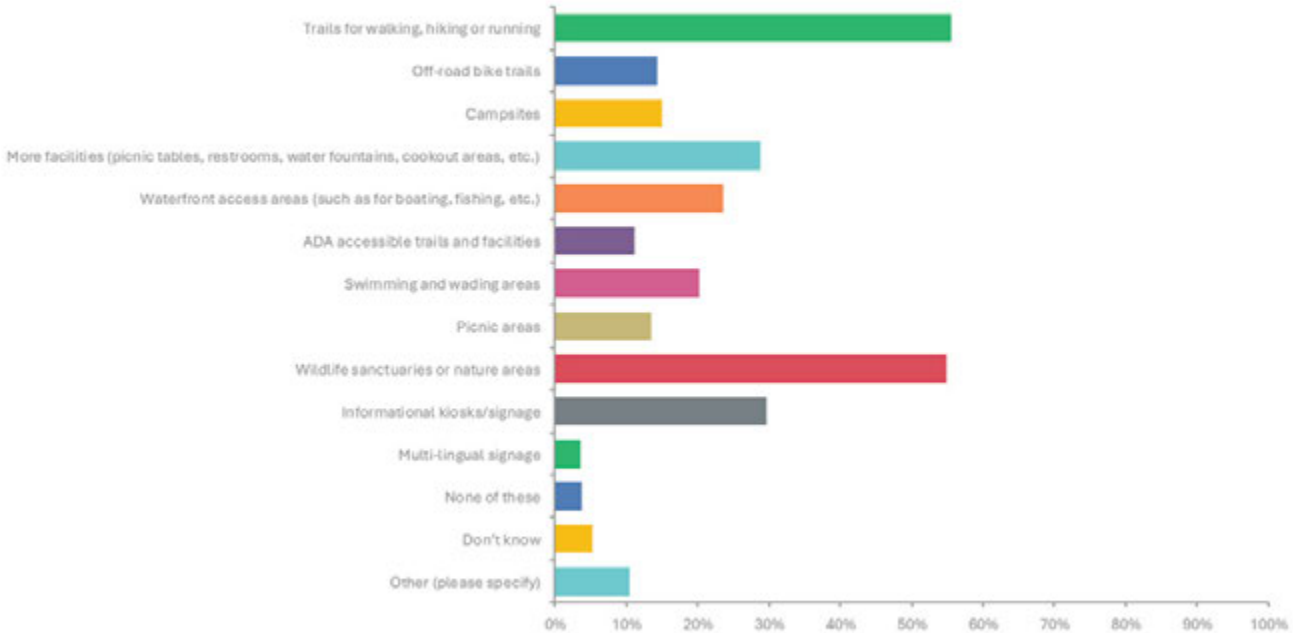
Q6: Summary of "Other" responses.



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Q7: **Which** features would you like to see more of in the Highlands Region?



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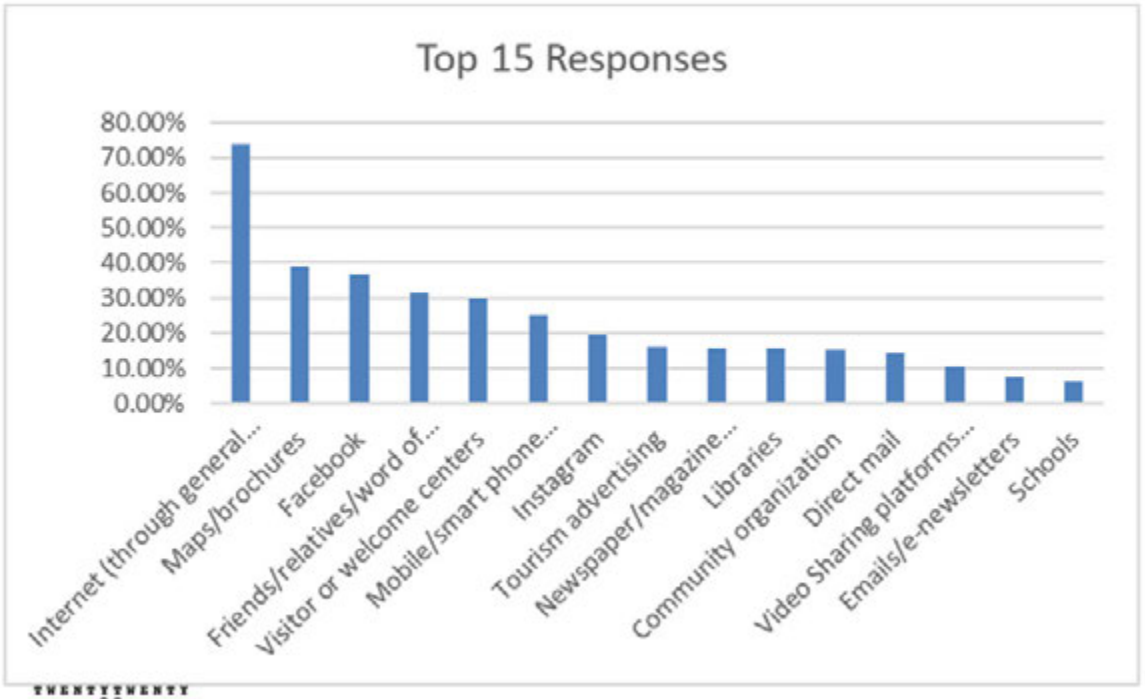
Q7: **Summary of "Other" responses.**



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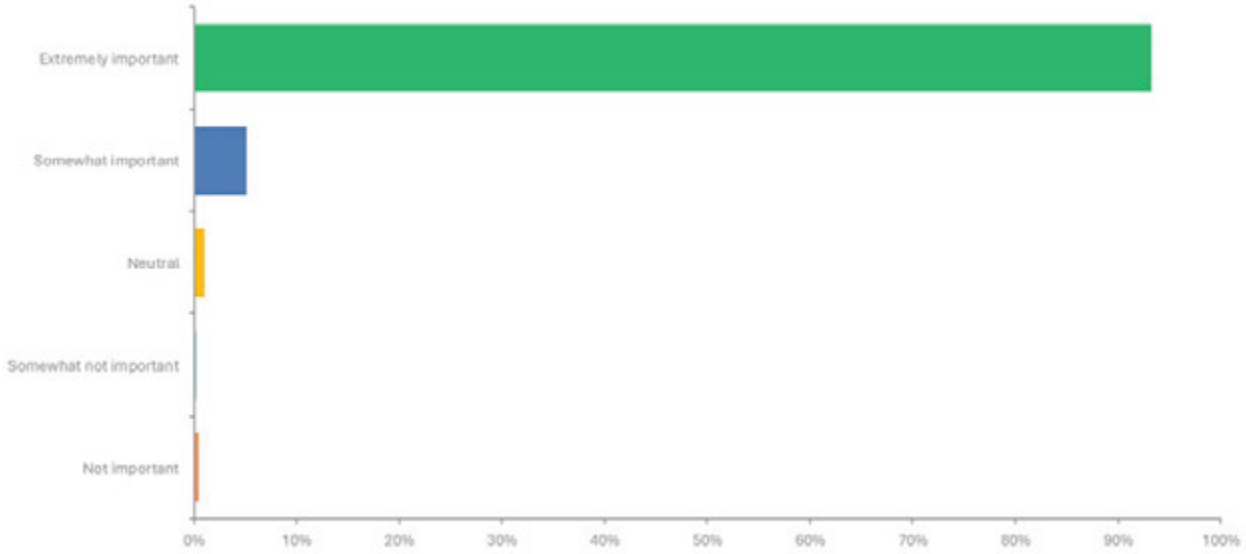
Q8: **What is the BEST way to get you information on outdoor recreation in the Highlands Region?**



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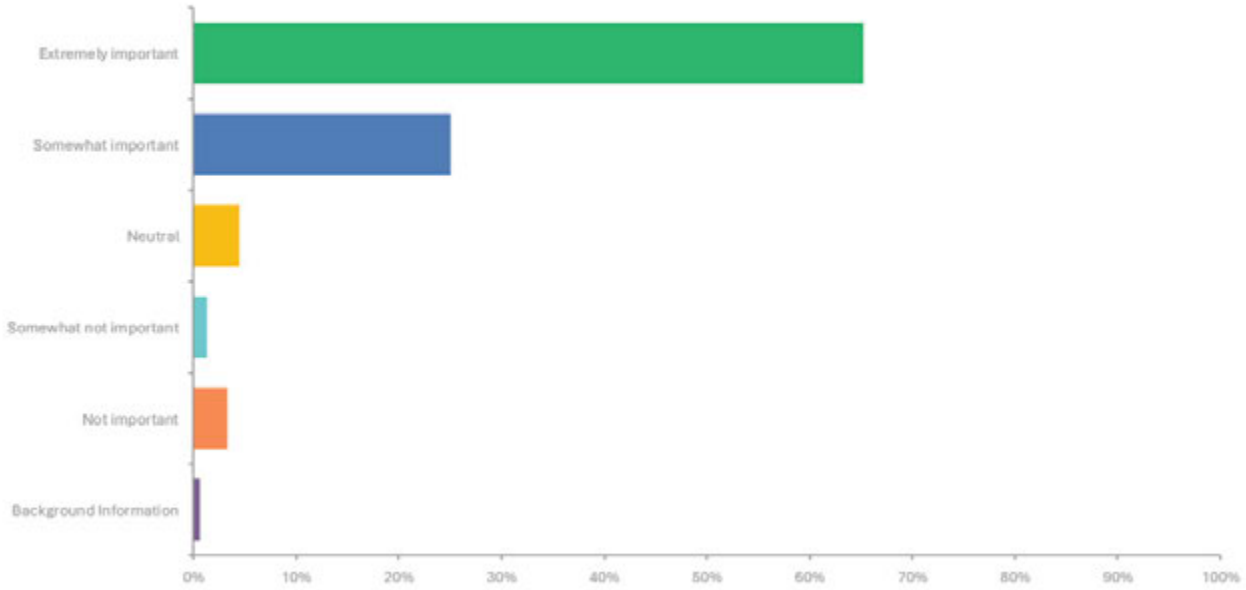
Q9: **How important is it to acquire and preserve open space in the Highlands Region for natural resource protection** (such as forest land, meadows, agricultural land, waterways, wetlands, etc.)



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Q10: **How important is it to acquire and preserve areas and facilities in the Highlands Region for active recreational use?**



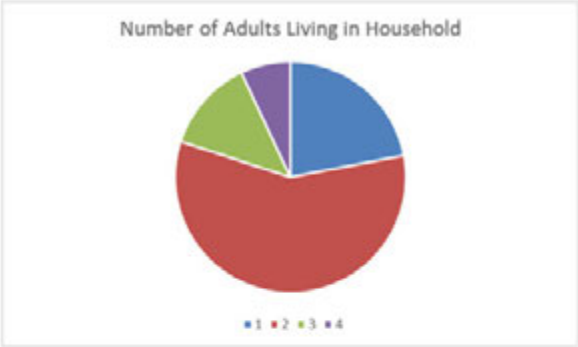
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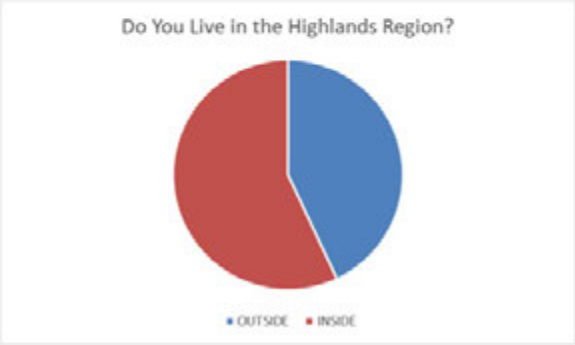
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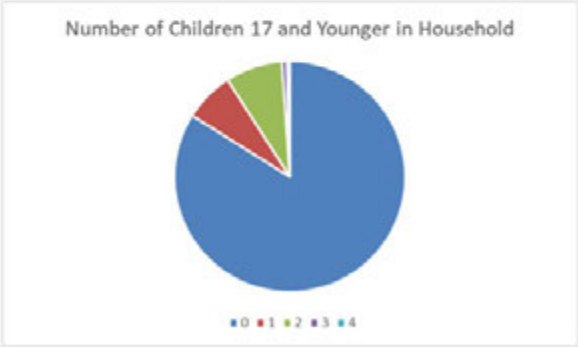
Demographics Summary

Gender

- 45% Male
- 50% Female
- 1% Non-binary
- 3% Prefer not to answer







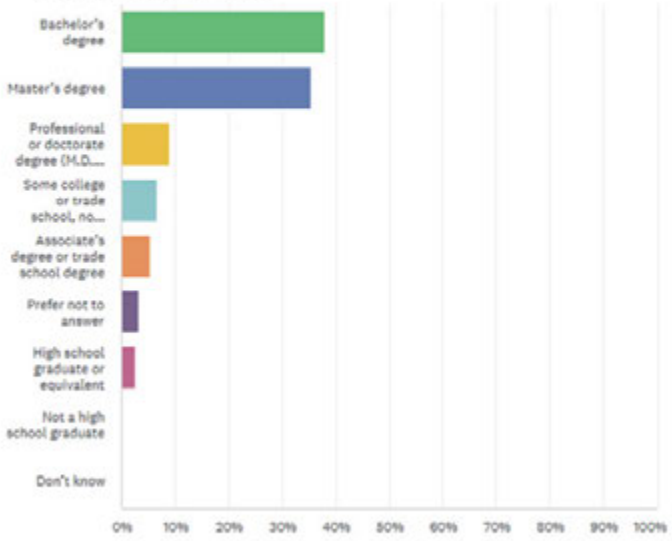
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Demographics Summary (cont.)

What is the highest level of education you have completed?



Languages Spoken at Home

- 99% English
- 3% Spanish
- Portuguese, Chinese, Haitian Creole, German, French, Latvian, Hebrew, Korean, Italian, Russian

What Races or Ethnic Backgrounds do you Consider Yourself?

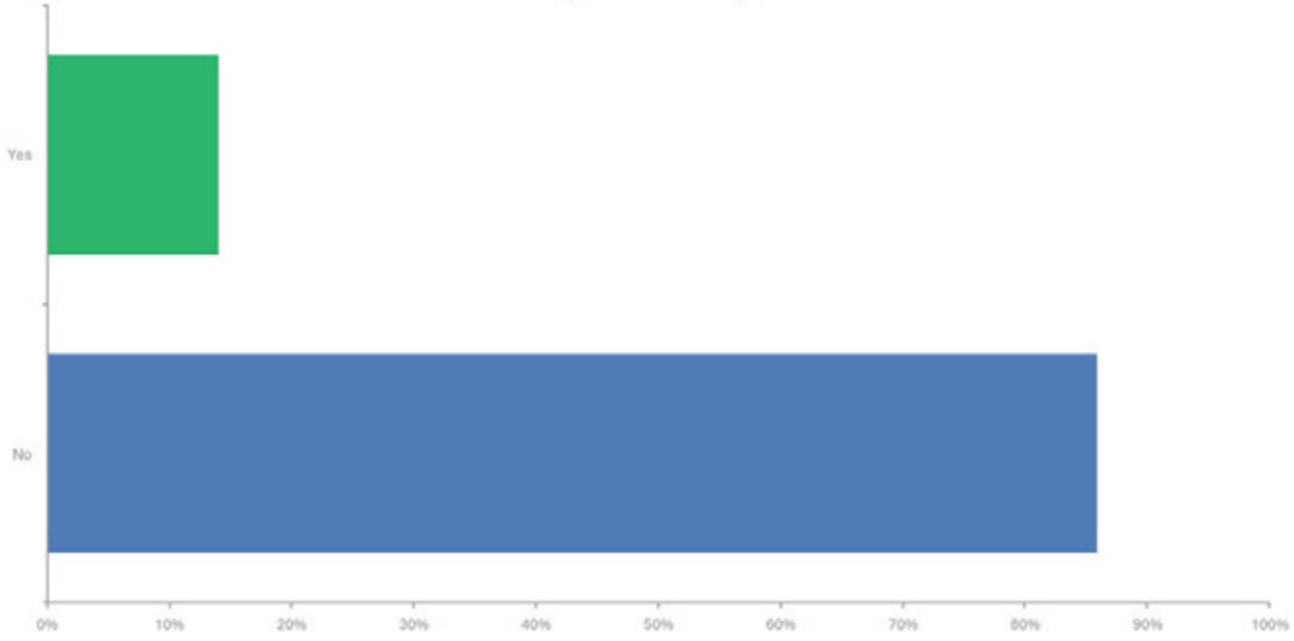
- 88% White or Caucasian
- 2% Hispanic or Latino
- 2% Black or African American
- 1% Native American or Middle Eastern or East Asian
- Less than 1% South Asian
- 7% Prefer not to say

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Q18: Does a disability impact your ability, or the ability of others in your household, to participate in outdoor recreation in the Highlands Region?



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Responses on how disabilities impact participation in outdoor recreation in the Highlands Region and recommendations

Concerns

- Difficulties Walking
- Limited stamina
- Wheelchair use
- Vision
- Bathroom Access
- Autism
- Excessive heat

Recommendations

- More benches
- Even pathways
- Parking accessibility

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Highlights

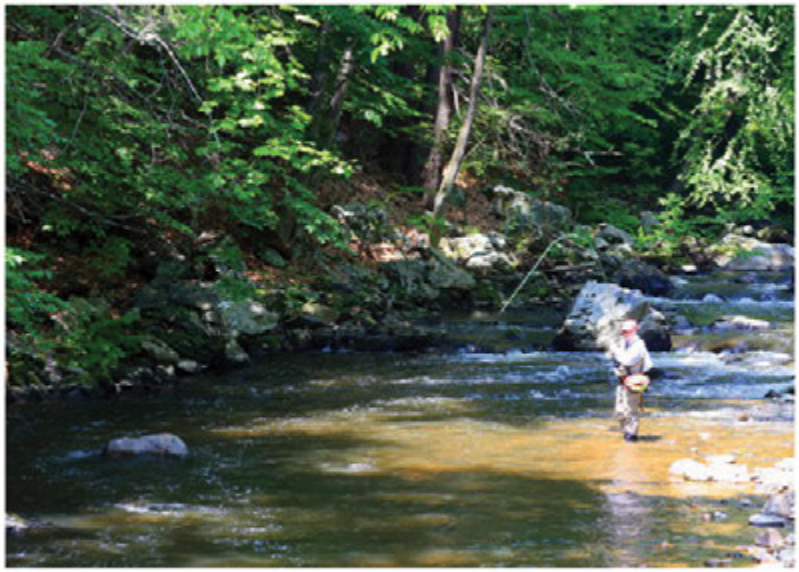
- People willing to travel significant distances to enjoy the NJ Highlands Region!
- While there was significant interest in taking advantage of trails, birding and wildlife observation, and picnicking, there was also Interest in "Dark Sky" designations, waterfront access, nature and wildlife photography opportunities, and botany observation.
- Preference for preserving more open space for natural areas.
- Need for maintenance and rehabilitation of historic structures and trails, including invasive species management.
- Considerations for ADA and access improvements throughout the Highlands Region.



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Next Steps - Use of Data

- Open Space and Recreation Plan:
  - feedback on criteria being developed in the subcommittees
  - input for prioritizing parcels
- Highlands Council: complement marketing study, plan for activities and investments
- Information for stakeholders: plan for activities and investments



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Appendix B.

Review of Local, Regional and State Plans for the New Jersey Highlands Region

For the New Jersey Highlands Council Outdoor Space and Recreation Plan
June 2026

Introduction

This document details key findings from the planning document review process in support of the New Jersey Highlands Council (Highlands Council) Outdoor Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP), supported by Trust for Public Land and TWENTY TWENTY Public Affairs. The Highlands Council recognizes a need for a network of outdoor recreation opportunities for every resident, inclusive of all ages, abilities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and marginalized groups. The Highlands Council OSRP presents a data-driven, replicable methodology to locate parcels that support a network of passive recreational opportunities for residents within the Highlands, and the OSRP is primarily written for this purpose.

This review illustrates alignment between the Highlands Council OSRP and equivalent OSRP and farmland preservation planning initiatives throughout the region. More than 40 total outdoor space and recreation plans, land use plans, farmland preservation plans, geospatial tools, and guidebooks were reviewed. These plans represent the vision, values, and goals of the boroughs, towns, counties, and regional planning agencies located in or adjacent to the Highlands Region as well as documents created by the Highlands Council and the State government of New Jersey.

This document is organized using key tasks from the Highlands Council OSRP to summarize similar efforts on the local, county, and regional scale. Key tasks from this effort include research and review of recreation assets and historical and cultural sites, land preservation goals and priority ranking systems, identification of properties for preservation through parcel selection criteria, and land acquisition and funding planning. This review will highlight region-wide planning efforts aligned with these tasks as well as the key subtopic areas of relevant geospatial tools, park access inequities, water quality and water-based recreation, and trail planning, forest fragmentation, agricultural land preservation and affordable housing. Furthermore, due to the prevalence of agricultural land preservation as both a standalone issue and for the benefit of open space preservation goals, this topic is further explored throughout the document.

Alignment with regional open space plans

Research and Review of Recreation Assets

STATE-WIDE PLANNING EFFORTS

There are multiple state-wide planning efforts aligned with the Highlands Council OSRP. Notably, the New Jersey State Planning Commission issued a map of the State Development and Redevelopment Plan in March of 2025, highlighting the environmentally sensitive planning areas, critical environmental, historic and cultural sites, parks and natural areas, and the rural planning areas in the state.[1] Additionally, the New Jersey Conservation Blueprint geospatial tools created by Rowan University, the New Jersey Conservation Foundation and the Nature Conservancy identifies "community green space" defined as "natural and agricultural lands close to people's residences and undeveloped lands in floodplains" as well as analyses for relevant topics such as farmland loss, farmland preservation, and forest fragmentation.[2] Lastly, the New Jersey State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan includes a goal of providing guidance to stakeholders on how to prioritize and locate new spaces, and how to locate which existing spaces need upgrades.[3]

Integrating the Conservation Blueprint

Data from the state-wide Conservation Blueprint is incorporated in the regional Highlands Council OSRP parcel selection spatial analysis. We reviewed their goals and criteria, and selected data tailored for the Highlands Region. Representatives from the Nature Conservancy helped guide this effort as part of a wider technical working group that identified additional criteria that are important to the Highlands Region but not present in the Conservation Blueprint. In practice, there is an opportunity for the new parcel-based Blueprint+ to be useful alongside the rankings identified by the Highlands Region in the data gathering stage of land conservation projects within the Highlands Region.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Highlands Council OSRP aims to create passive recreation opportunities that celebrate areas and structures of historical and cultural significance to build public spaces that reflect the values and history of the communities in which they live. All reviewed outdoor space and recreation plans recognize the importance of preserving areas of historical and cultural significance. Some, like the 2022 Vernon Township OSRP highlight the work that has been done to protect both agricultural and Indigenous history through the Vernon Township Historical Society.[4] Most plans, like the 2025 Sparta OSRP focus on preserving the "small town feel" present throughout the region, including architectural styling of historic downtowns and residential areas, scenic views, and working farmlands.[5]

Other plans that aim to preserve land of historical and cultural significance include the Borough of High Bridge 2020 Open Space Plan[6], the Township of Denville 2024 Draft OSRP[7], the Township of Boonton OSRP[8], and the Township of Rockaway OSRP.[9]

Government agencies located in the Highlands Region reference the 2008 Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP) as an important part of their land preservation frameworks.[10] The 2008 Highlands (RMP) recommends that the Council "provide educational and technical assistance to municipal and county officials regarding methods to identify and preserve the historic,

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1 www.nj.gov/state/bac/planning/documents/maps/stateplanmapMarch2025.jpg.

2 www.nj-map.com/blueprint/.

3 dep.nj.gov/outside-together/.

4 www.vernontwp.com/images/OSRP_part_1.pdf.

5 www.spartanj.org/DocumentCenter/View/1913/Sparta-OSRP-Update-FINAL_20250115.

6 highbridge.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Open-Space-and-Recreation-Plan-2020.pdf.

7 cms1files.revize.com/denville/docs/Open%20Space/Denville%20Township%20OSRP%20Update%20-%20Draft%20III%20(3.7.2024)r.pdf.

8 www.boontontownship.com/news/post/19318/.

9 www.rockawaytownship.org/164/Open-Space.

10 www.nj.gov/njhighlands/planning/rmp/.

cultural, and scenic resources of their communities" as well as promoting historic preservation as an economic development tool through tourism.[11]

RECREATIONAL SITES

Identifying areas for added recreational sites is central to the Highlands Council OSRP. The 2008 Land Preservation and Stewardship Technical Report done in support of the Highlands Regional Master Plan includes a component for recreational resources, focusing broadly on outdoor recreational activities. Criteria in that study included recreational trails, scenic view sheds, visible ridge tops, existing parks and buffers, recreational waters and shoreline buffers, and historic and cultural sites.[12] Subsequently All OSRPs include goals for locating new spaces for outdoor recreation and improving the equipment and programming in existing places. Some focus on both the creation of new sites and the improvement of existing spaces. Others, like the Borough of Alpha 2024 OSRP, note that the Borough has completed historic goals of land acquisition and parcel selection and is now focused on improving community amenities at existing sites.[13] Similarly, the Borough of Allamuchy 2024 OSRP notes that there are extensive preserved lands, but there is a need for public playgrounds and parks that are owned by the Borough.[14] When creating new recreational sites is a key goal, several of the OSRPs focus on trails that can connect existing spaces, promote active transportation options for residents, and create buffers for riverine corridors. For example, the Morris County 2024 Open Space Master Plan aims to enhance the County's investment in open space to provide linkages between parks and open space and to add buffers and trails to waterways.[15] This topic is further explored under the "Connecting trails to downtown areas" header.

Key Topics in Land Preservation

This section summarizes land preservation goals in regional and local governments that align with key topics to be addressed in the Highlands Council OSRP. Topics include park and open space inequities, water quality and water-based recreation, trail connections, forest fragmentation, agricultural land preservation, and affordable housing.

ADDRESSING PARK AND OPEN SPACE INEQUITIES

The Highlands Council OSRP will act as a guide for all communities that seek to address inequities in open space access, providing a more in-depth approach than the plans reviewed in this process. This aligns with equity initiatives from the state's Green Acres Program, where applications for projects within Overburdened Communities are given priority.[16] NJ DEP maintains an annual database and defines Overburdened Communities (OBCs) as Census Block Groups where "at least 35 percent of households are low-income, or at least 40 percent of residents identify as minority or as members of a State recognized tribal community, or at least 40 percent of the households have limited English proficiency."[17]

When addressing park and open space inequities, most plans focus on ensuring that parks are welcoming and functional for people of all ages and sometimes specify that this also applies to people of all abilities. This is seen in plans for the Townships of Rockaway[18] and Washington.[19] Statewide, the 2025 State Development and Redevelopment Plan aims to promote outdoor

11 www.nj.gov/njhighlands/planning/rmp/.

12 www.nj.gov/njhighlands/planning/rmp/tech_reports/tr_land_pres_and_stewardship.pdf.

13 login.microsoft.com/consumers/fido/get?mkt=EN-US&lc=1033&uiflavor=web.

14 thetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com/sites/NJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan/_layouts/15/AccessDenied.aspx?Source=https%3A%2F%2Fthetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com%2F%3Ab%3A%2Fs%2FNJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan%2FEVd1wDYaZ9hGpoWSe34lPrYBtDDJ2ng-KWE25vKttZxqbw%3Fe%3DY1Fjr8&correlation=008e1ba2-80e6-d000-700a-b87b3f7136d2&Type=web&SiteId=dd22d327-ad43-4328-b0a6-4e4d091d2e4c&allowautoredirecttosource=true.

15 drive.google.com/file/d/1ALeZERdbxKjsDG0dvyXC5dvMNN8jVdGb/view.

16 dep.nj.gov/ej/communities/.

17 dep.nj.gov/ej/communities/.

18 www.rockawaytownship.org/164/Open-Space.

19 cms2.revize.com/revize/washingtontownshipnj/Open%20Space%20%20Plan%20%20%20Update-Final-6.13.2018%20(1).pdf.

recreation for "year-round enjoyment and the health of all residents."[20] In terms of socioeconomic and racial equity, two plans explicitly have goals on these topic areas. The New Jersey State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (NJ SCORP) explicitly calls for guidance on prioritizing upgrades to existing and new spaces for Overburdened Communities.[21] The 2024 Borough of Allamuchy OSRP calls for park distribution to prioritize lower-income residents, since they are more likely to have smaller yard spaces tha. presumably limit outdoor recreational opportunities.[22]

Some plans, like the 2024 Township of Denville OSRP[23] and the Borough of High Bridge Open Space Plan (through a decentralized recreational system)[24] call for all citizens to have equal and accessible access to open space and recreational opportunities. The Denville OSRP explicitly calls for the use of joint use agreements between schools and local governing entities, so that schoolyards transition into neighborhood parks during non-school hours.

WATER QUALITY AND WATER-BASED RECREATION

The Highlands Council OSRP recognizes that the important role that open space has in both filtering stormwater for groundwater repletion and flood control as well as providing areas for water-based recreation. In general, all OSRPs and farmland preservation plans include water quality and water recreation recommendations and goals. The NJ SCORP calls for the enhancement of access to waters consistent with the Public Trust Doctrine[25] and goals from the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.[26] The Borough of High Bridge has a goal to maintain water quality and groundwater recharge areas[27], and the Township of Rockaway's Open Space and Recreation Plan aims to secure the Beaver Brook watershed and its aquifer.[28] The 2024 Allamuchy OSRP also aims to "develop continuous greenbelt along stream corridors to provide buffers for natural habitats, preserve scenic waterways, and control flooding" and establish "blue trails" for canoeing and kayaking.[29]

One key theme from this review is land acquisition along rivers to provide water-based recreation and to protect water quality and flood mitigation efforts. For example, the Morris County 2024 Open Space Master Plan[30] and the Borough of Alpha 2024 OSRP[31] call for the prioritization of properties or easements along streams and rivers to establish greenways and linear parks.

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20 www.nj.gov/state/bac/planning/documents/update-to-state-plan/dfsdrp_20250915.pdf.

21 dep.nj.gov/wp-content/uploads/outside-together/final-nj-scorp-with-nps-and-gov-letter_v3.pdf.

22 thetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com/sites/NJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan/_layouts/15/AccessDenied.aspx?Source=https%3A%2F%2Fthetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com%2F%3Ab%3A%2Fs%2FNJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan%2FEVd1wDYaZ9hGpoWSe34lPrYBtDDJ2ng-KWE25vKttZxqbw%3Fe%3DY1Fjr8&correlation=9b8e1ba2-9084-d000-700a-b6534e45be65&Type=web&SiteId=dd22d327-ad43-4328-b0a6-4e4d091d2e4c&allowautoredirecttosource=true.

23 cms1files.revize.com/denville/docs/Open%20Space/Denville%20Township%20OSRP%20Update%20-%20Draft%20III%20(3.7.2024)r.pdf.

24 highbridge.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Open-Space-and-Recreation-Plan-2020.pdf.

25 dep.nj.gov/publicaccess/faq/#public-trust-doctrine.

26 dep.nj.gov/wp-content/uploads/outside-together/final-nj-scorp-with-nps-and-gov-letter_v3.pdf.

27 highbridge.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Open-Space-and-Recreation-Plan-2020.pdf.

28 www.rockawaytownship.org/164/Open-Space.

29 thetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com/sites/NJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan/_layouts/15/AccessDenied.aspx?Source=https%3A%2F%2Fthetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com%2F%3Ab%3A%2Fs%2FNJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan%2FEVd1wDYaZ9hGpoWSe34lPrYBtDDJ2ng-KWE25vKttZxqbw%3Fe%3DY1Fjr8&correlation=d98e1ba2-80d9-d000-700a-bf1aaff9c299&Type=web&SiteId=dd22d327-ad43-4328-b0a6-4e4d091d2e4c&allowautoredirecttosource=true.

30 drive.google.com/file/d/1ALeZERdbxKjsDG0dvyXC5dvMNN8jVdGb/view.

31 thetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com/sites/NJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan/_layouts/15/AccessDenied.aspx?Source=https%3A%2F%2Fthetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com%2Fsites%2FNJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan%2FShared+Documents%2FMunicipal+%26+County+Open+Space+%26+Preservation+Plans_Highlands+Council+Files%2FExisting+OSRP%2FAlpha+Open+Space+and+Recreation+Plan+2024.pdf%3Fcsf%3D1%26web%3D1%26e%3DGcBLKR%26CID%3D06463f76-1063-48e9-81ea-5ebfdb0979c6&correlation=e88e1ba2-608b-d000-700a-b9635a7fd65e&Type=item&name=9a21db75-b708-4a32-abbb-cad94006c9fc&listItemId=145&listItemUniqueId=a2091de1-9267-41c8-8659-8013ea5f531e&allowautoredirecttosource=true.

TRAIL PLANNING

The Highlands Council OSRP recognizes a need for a regional—and statewidel—trail network to meet recreational needs. To address this—and with the last comprehensive state-wide trail plan being published in 2009—the State of New Jersey is developing the New Jersey Trails Playbook[32] as an expansion on the NJ SCORP. This will comprise a series of planning guidance documents to ensure that all residents have access to recreational trails.[33]

Downtown Planning

A minority of the documents reviewed detail ways that governments are using their trail systems to further connect residents and tourists to downtown and commercial districts. The State Development and Redevelopment Plan calls for a statewide effort to "create more pedestrian and transit-oriented environments by adding sidewalks or walkways to link buildings, defining attractive, convent, and safe outdoor spaces."[34] The Borough of High Bridge, the Borough of Alpha, the Township of Denville[35], the Borough of Chester[36], the Town of Phillipsburg[37], and the Borough of Ringwood call for linking downtown shopping and restaurants through designated bike routes. The High Bridge plan highlights the downtown area adjacent to South Branch Raritan River as an area of interest.[38] The Borough of Alpha aims to use bike lanes and pedestrian walkways to connect residential, commercial, recreational, and school lands.[39] The Town of Phillipsburg's Riverfront Redevelopment Plan will revitalize the riverfront district through a variety of economic development opportunities, including eco-tourism.[40] *Connecting Ringwood* (2024) provides a framework for trails, paths and roadways improvements to promote active transportation options, connecting people where "live, work, and play".[41] Lastly, the Township of Byram 2022 OSRP calls for the creation of a Trail Master Plan with guiding principles including "respect for NJ Highlands, expanding trail systems in comprehensive network, using trails system as a catalyst for sustainable economic development".[42]

FOREST FRAGMENTATION

Forestland preservation will be addressed in the Highlands Council OSRP as an important function of open space preservation. Similarly, all farmland and open space preservation plans referenced the importance of forestland preservation and promoting practices that prevent fragmentation, especially calling for effective use of funds from the Forest Legacy Program. Vernon[43],

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32 dep.nj.gov/greenacres/2009-new-jersey-trails-plan/.

33 dep.nj.gov/greenacres/trails-program-plan/.

34 www.nj.gov/state/bac/planning/documents/update-to-state-plan/dfsdrp_20250915.pdf.

35 cms1files.revize.com/denville/docs/Open%20Space/Denville%20Township%20OSRP%20Update%20-%20Draft%20III%20(3.7.2024)r.pdf.

36 thetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com/sites/NJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan/_layouts/15/AccessDenied.aspx?-Source=https%3A%2F%2Fthetrustforpublicland%2Esharepoint%2Ecom%2Fsites%2FNJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan%2F-Shared%20Documents%2FMunicipal%20%26%20County%20Open%20Space%20%26%20Preservation%20Plans%5FHighlands%20Council%20Files%2FExisting%20OSRP%2FChester%20Borough%20OSRP%20Final%2D%2010%2E17%2E2023%2Epdf%3FCT%3D1757695400481%26OR%3DItemsView&correlation=1c8f1ba2%2D104c%2Dd000%2D78b1%2Dd4548f6f35e6&Type=item&name=9a21d-b75%2Db708%2D4a32%2Dabbb%2Dcad94006c9fc&listItemId=149&listItemUniqueId=6e5b0fa3%2D2530%2D4d40%2D92ef%2De35830e1a479.

37 www.phillipsburgnj.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Phillipsburg-N-J-Riverfront-Redevelopment-Plan.pdf.

38 highbridge.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Open-Space-and-Recreation-Plan-2020.pdf.

39 thetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com/sites/NJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan/_layouts/15/AccessDenied.aspx?Source=https%3A%2F%2Fthetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com%2Fsites%2FN-JHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan%2FShared+Documents%2FMunicipal+%26+County+Open+Space+%26+Pres-ervation+Plans_Highlands+Council+Files%2FExisting+OSRP%2FAlpha+Open+Space+and+Recreation+Plan+2024.pdf%3Fcsf%3D1%26web%3D1%26e%3DGcBLKR%26CID%3D06463f76-1063-48e9-81ea-5ebfdb0979c6&correlation=468f1ba2-f04f-d000-700a-b4c55c9373a6&Type=item&name=9a21db75-b708-4a32-abbb-cad94006c9fc&listItemId=145&listItemUniqueId=a2091de1-9267-41c8-8659-8013ea5f531e&allowautoredirecttosource=true.

40 www.phillipsburgnj.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Phillipsburg-N-J-Riverfront-Redevelopment-Plan.pdf.

41 ringwoodnj.net/filestorage/2500/2506/Connecting_Ringwood_Report_and_Appendix.pdf.

42 www.byramtwp.org/useruploads/docs/Byram_OSRP_63020.pdf.

43 www.vernontwp.com/images/OSRP_part_1.pdf.

Franklin[44], and Washington[45] Townships, and Kinnelon[46] and Glen Gardner[47] Boroughs have recommendations to support owners of forested lands, providing technical assistance to incentivize permanently protecting properties. The Borough of Glen Gardner's plan also includes efforts to develop and implement a Forest Management/Stewardship Plan for government land consistent with the state Forest Stewardship Program. Notably, the Borough of Chester OSRP[48] goes one step further by maintaining the "borough's tree-covered character by seeking and acquiring remaining forested lands". The OSRP's for the Townships of Sparta[49], Rockaway[50], Denville[51], and Byram[52] and the Boroughs of Kinnelon[53] and Califon[54] recognize forested areas as being important for critical wildlife habitat and water loss prevention; some of these plans have measures for invasive species prevention. Byram sits apart from other plans as it includes a measure for reforestation.

Additionally, the farmland preservation plans for Morris County[55] and Vernon Township[56] recognize prime forested areas as environmentally sensitive and advocate for lot size averaging and more efficient land use practices to conserve forested areas, respectively.

The Townships of Denville[57] and Rockaway[58] also recognize the impact of forest carbon sequestration with the Rockaway OSRP also calling out forests' utility in reducing heat burden.

AGRICULTURAL LAND PRESERVATION

The Highlands Council OSRP will elevate the role that agricultural land preservation plays in reaching larger open space preservation goals. Coordination from regional farmland preservation plans pertaining to parks and open space are present throughout this document as they pertain to parks and open space efforts. The goal of this section is to examine the inverse: the ways that regional parks and open space plans are coordinating with farmland preservation efforts. All OSRPs recognize the importance of farmland preservation, both as a standalone mission as well as a crucial way to reach broader open space preservation and smart growth goals. Notably, the Morris County Master Plan[59] aims to use recreational spaces to protect agriculture and farmland by providing buffers from incompatible development and negative environmental impacts. The Morris

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44 www.nj.gov/agriculture/sadc/documents/Comprehensive%20FP%20Plans/Franklin%20Twp,%20Warren.pdf.

45 cms2.revize.com/revize/washingtontownshipnj/Open%20Space%20%20Plan%20%20%20Update-Final-6.13.2018%20(1).pdf.

46 www.kinnelonboro.org/documents/Kinnelon%20Borough%20OSRP%20Update%20Final%20(rev)%2012_28_2022(1).pdf.

47 thetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com/sites/NJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan/_layouts/15/AccessDenied.aspx?Source=https%3A%2F%2Fthetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com%2F%3Aw%3A%2Fr%2Fsites%2FNJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan%2FShared+Documents%2FMunicipal+%26+County+Open+Space+%26+Preservation+Plans_Highlands+Council+Files%2FExisting+OSRP%2FOpen+Space+and+Recreation+Plan_DRAFT_2020_03+03.docx%3Fd%3Dwfb800bf1e3d74a9ca53013c4d14b69dc%26csf%3D1%26web%3D1%26e%3DMoYghM%26wdLOR%3Dc5608B1AF-D470-3643-9A0E-4BD3C5BFAC87%26OR%3DWord&correlation=c08f1ba2-908b-d000-700a-bd7f2022b6c2&Type=item&name=9a21db75-b708-4a32-abbb-cad94006c9fc&listItemId=158&listItemUniqueId=fb800bf1-e3d7-4a9c-a530-13c4d14b69dc&allowautoredirecttosource=true.

48 thetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com/sites/NJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan/_layouts/15/AccessDenied.aspx?Source=https%3A%2F%2Fthetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com%2Fsites%2FNJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan%2FShared+Documents%2FMunicipal+%26+County+Open+Space+%26+Preservation+Plans_Highlands+Council+Files%2FExisting+OSRP%2FChester+Borough+OSRP+Final-+10.17.2023.pdf%3FCT%3D1757695400481%26OR%3DItemsView&correlation=ca8f1ba2-505c-d000-700a-bba8cee9cd70&Type=item&name=9a21db75-b708-4a32-abbb-cad94006c9fc&listItemId=149&listItemUniqueId=6e5b0fa3-2530-4d40-92ef-e35830e1a479&allowautoredirecttosource=true.

49 www.spartanj.org/DocumentCenter/View/1913/Sparta-OSRP-Update-FINAL_20250115.

50 www.rockawaytownship.org/164/Open-Space.

51 cms1files.revize.com/denville/docs/Open%20Space/Denville%20Township%20OSRP%20Update%20-%20Draft%20III%20(3.7.2024)r.pdf.

52 www.byramtwp.org/useruploads/docs/Byram_OSRP_63020.pdf.

53 www.kinnelonboro.org/documents/Kinnelon%20Borough%20OSRP%20Update%20Final%20(rev)%2012_28_2022(1).pdf.

54 www.califonboro.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Califon-OSRP-Final-Draft-4-17-2023.pdf.

55 www.morriscountynj.gov/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/departments/planning-amp-preservation-farmland/comprehensive-farmland-preservation-plan/morris-county-comprehensive-farmland-preservation-plan-2022.pdf.

56 www.vernontwp.com/images/OSRP_part_1.pdf.

57 cms1files.revize.com/denville/docs/Open%20Space/Denville%20Township%20OSRP%20Update%20-%20Draft%20III%20(3.7.2024)r.pdf.

58 www.rockawaytownship.org/164/Open-Space.

59 drive.google.com/file/d/1ALeZERdbxKjsDG0dvyXC5dvMNN8jVdGb/view.

County Farmland Preservation grant's impact—in terms of total acreage and money raised — is celebrated in several OSRPs within the County's jurisdiction, including the Township of Rockaway[60] and Boonton[61]. The Township of Sparta OSRP[62] also expresses similar goals pertaining to coordinating with the Sussex County Farmland Preservation Plan.

Several OSRPs have recommendations to support farmland preservation by working directly with landowners. The Washington Township OSRP[63] details that the Township will work with the Agriculture Advisory Committee to encourage farm owners to enroll with the farmland preservation program in addition to providing landowners with technical assistance for funding applications meant for local and regional projects of statewide significance. Several plans had chapters dedicated to describing the environmental, economic, and ecological benefits of farmland preservation, including those from Vernon Township[64], The Randolph Township Environmental Guidebook[65], and the Borough of Chester[66].

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

The Highlands Council RMP highlights the importance of affordable housing and details ways that it supports municipalities in growth areas where land for affordable housing must be designated; the Council ORSP will do the same.[67] This aligns with funding stipulations from the Green Acres Fund where "funding should not be used to impede a municipality's ability or responsibility to meet its constitutional obligation to provide a fair share of affordable housing."[68] Every region in the state of New Jersey must set aside land for its "fair share" of affordable housing per the New Jersey Supreme Court's Mount Laurel decisions.[69] At the time that this document was written, municipalities must adopt their housing elements to adhere to fair share housing obligations by June 30th, 2025. The New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan recommends the coordination of regional, county, and municipal land use plans with the statewide SCORP to encourage future development that balances both housing needs and new space for recreational purposes.

The plans that were reviewed show that local governments have varying strategies to adhere to the affordable housing mandate. Chester Borough[70] and the Township of Denville[71] set aside land for affordable housing and exclude it from being considered for open space preservation. Several of the local and regional governments recognize the need to promote land use regulations sufficient for all uses in their OSRPs, including the need to adhere to their affordable housing obligations. The Townships of

60 www.rockawaytownship.org/164/Open-Space.

61 www.boontontownship.com/news/post/19318/.

62 www.spartanj.org/DocumentCenter/View/1913/Sparta-OSRP-Update-FINAL_20250115.

63 cms2.revize.com/revize/washingtontownshipnj/Open%20Space%20%20Plan%20%20%20Update-Final-6.13.2018%20(1).pdf.

64 www.vernontwp.com/images/OSRP_part_1.pdf.

65 www.randolphnj.org/DocumentCenter/View/1032/Randolph-Township---Environmental-Guidebook-PDF?bidId=.

66 thetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com/sites/NJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan/_layouts/15/AccessDenied.aspx?Source=https%3A%2F%2Fthetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com%2Fsites%2FNJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan%2FShared+Documents%2FMunicipal+%26+County+Open+Space+%26+Preservation+Plans_Highlands+Council+Files%2FExisting+OSRP%2FChester+Borough+OSRP+Final-+10.17.2023.pdf%3FCT%3D1757695400481%26OR%3DItemsView&correlation=67901ba2-b07c-d000-78b1-de0e253d39db&Type=item&name=9a21db75-b708-4a32-abbb-cad94006c9fc&listItemId=149&listItemUniqueId=6e5b0fa3-2530-4d40-92ef-e35830e1a479&allowautoredirecttosource=true.

67 www.nj.gov/njhighlands/planning/rmp/highlands_rmp_web.pdf.

68 dep.nj.gov/wp-content/uploads/greenacres/pdf/local-and-nonprofit-guide_affordable-housing-and-green-acres-9_2020.pdf.

69 www.fairsharehousing.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Mount-Laurel-Factsheet.pdf.

70 thetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com/sites/NJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan/_layouts/15/AccessDenied.aspx?Source=https%3A%2F%2Fthetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com%2Fsites%2FNJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan%2FShared+Documents%2FMunicipal+%26+County+Open+Space+%26+Preservation+Plans_Highlands+Council+Files%2FExisting+OSRP%2FChester+Borough+OSRP+Final-+10.17.2023.pdf%3FCT%3D1757695400481%26OR%3DItemsView&correlation=7f901ba2-f0bb-d000-700a-b5859d7199f1&Type=item&name=9a21db75-b708-4a32-abbb-cad94006c9fc&listItemId=149&listItemUniqueId=6e5b0fa3-2530-4d40-92ef-e35830e1a479&allowautoredirecttosource=true.

71 cms1files.revize.com/denville/docs/Open%20Space/Denville%20Township%20OSRP%20Update%20-%20Draft%20III%20(3.7.2024)r.pdf.

Sparta[72], Randolph[73], and the Town of Phillipsburg[74] use smart growth principles to manage growth through increases in more dense development and open space conservation. For more on smart growth, the full description of smart growth Principles can be found on the American Planning Association's website.[75] The Environmental Guidebook for the Township of Randolph supports sustainable housing through a variety of housing types, walkable neighborhoods and incorporating green design. While they do not call out smart growth principles by name, the Borough of Kinnelon[76], Morris County[77], the Townships of Vernon[78] and Franklin[79] highlight strategies that promote smart growth principles like mixed use development, accessory dwelling units (i.e., granny flats) to increase density, cluster zoning, smaller lot sizes, and an increase in multifamily housing types.

This project was completed prior to the fourth round of affordable housing set asides completed by local governments to adhere to the affordable housing requirements. Therefore, it is possible that parcels identified for preservation and conservation conflict with parcels that governments have identified for affordable housing. No land acquisition recommendations will be made by the Highlands Region until the agency can confidently state that its recommendations will not impede efforts made by local governments to fulfill their "fair share requirements".

Parcel Selection Criteria, Priority Ranking Systems, and Geospatial Tools

The Council OSRP's central goal is to create a data-driven approach through geospatial analysis to acquire land to meet the recreational needs of communities. For the regional plans reviewed here, some plans and reports list criteria for selecting parcels that fit defined sets of criteria for open space and agricultural preservation. For example, the NJ Highlands Council Sustainable Agriculture Technical Report includes approaches for assessing agricultural land resource value (soil quality, tillable acres, boundaries and buffers, development potential/threat of change to non-agricultural use, local commitment/density/critical mass, size).[80] The Green Acres 2005–2007 Land Preservation Plan lists the following criteria for trail and outdoor recreation parcel selection for lands that make up greenways: including or abutting trails, including or abutting designated wild and scenic rivers, linking to existing parks with significant outdoor recreational uses, or acting as a buffer to such areas. It also includes criteria for recreational needs relative to population and for a broad variety of recreational purposes.[81]

GEOSPATIAL TOOLS

Several plans note the value in utilizing geospatial analyses in selecting and ranking properties for land preservation. A NJ Highlands Economic Sustainability Plan action item calls for using GIS to identify and score where sites are well-suited, considering employment centers, transportation, and recreation availability.[82] The Morris County Open Space Plan supports "the identification of locations suitable for future conservation efforts using all available tools, including, but not limited to the use of online resources.[83] This plan also recommends the creation of an enhanced web-based information hub on county parks to create a database of all existing and proposed greenways.

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72 www.spartanj.org/DocumentCenter/View/1913/Sparta-OSRP-Update-FINAL_20250115.

73 www.randolphnj.org/DocumentCenter/View/1032/Randolph-Township---Environmental-Guidebook-PDF?bidId=.

74 ringwoodnj.net/filestorage/2500/2506/Connecting_Ringwood_Report_and_Appendix.pdf.

75 www.planning.org/policy/guides/adopted/smartgrowth.htm.

76 www.kinnelonboro.org/documents/Kinnelon%20Borough%20OSRP%20Update%20Final%20(rev)%2012_28_2022(1).pdf.

77 drive.google.com/file/d/1ALeZERdbxKjsDG0dvyXC5dvMNN8jVdGb/view.

78 www.vernontwp.com/images/March_2023_Vernon_Township_Farmland_Preservation_Plan_Final.pdf.

79 www.nj.gov/agriculture/sadc/documents/Comprehensive%20FP%20Plans/Franklin%20Twp,%20Warren.pdf.

80 www.nj.gov/njhighlands/planning/rmp/tech_reports/tr_sustainable_ag.pdf.

81 dspace.njstatelib.org/bitstreams/3f4c1a93-91c0-4b94-9116-f2f62d600513/download.

82 www.nj.gov/njhighlands/documents/economic_sustainability/esp_final_2022.pdf.

83 dep.nj.gov/gis/nj-geoweb/.

The list of notable GIS tools found in this review process include:

- The Conservation Blueprint (raster data)
- The Conservation Blueprint+ (parcel-specific data)
- Connecting Habitat Across New Jersey (CHANJ) Action Regions for New Jersey, and
- NJ Adapt by Rutgers University
- NJDEP GIS6 resource
- NJGeoWeb

Lastly, the Highlands Council offers an online tool that allows users to submit missing preserved parcels to be verified and added to its inventory.

Land Acquisition and Funding Plan

Along with the geospatial analysis that will find parcels to fill recreational needs, the Highlands Council OSRP will have a land acquisition and funding plan to ensure that capital can be found to secure said parcels. The NJ Department of Environmental Protection through the Green Acres Program provides longstanding funding for protecting open space and parkland. This funding is available for rural, suburban, or urban areas and for public and nonprofit organizations. Disinvested communities are prioritized for funding. Funding continues into 2026, with the next round of applications due in February. However, according to the Land Preservation Status Report from the Highlands Council, there is no consistent, stable source of funding specifically for land preservation in the Highlands as of December of 2022.[84] The Highlands Council has the ultimate goal of $10M annual funding to permit the Council to match funds for conservation and easement acquisition projects and have noted a portion of the Corporate Business Tax (CBT) that is dedicated to state's open space, farmland preservation, and historic preservation programs and administered through the Garden State Preservation Trust. Though this funding has not been consistent over the years for reasons specified in the report.

For the Boroughs, funding through county programming is common, like the Borough of High Bridge seeking funding from the County Economic Development Corporation to support signage improvements[85], and the Township of Boonton leveraging the Morris County Preservation Trust.[86] Boroughs like Alpha[87], Califon[88], and Chester have established Open Space Funds that are used to acquire and develop land for recreation, conservation, and preserve farmland and historic resources. The Borough of Chester also recommends partnering with state, county, and federal programming to maximize their Open Space Fund.[89]

Most other plans did not seem to have established funding or funding strategies to pursue. Notably, the Township of Byram is considering using an Open Space Trust Fund for park maintenance and upkeep and listed possible funding sources including Sussex County Open Space Trust Fund, federal Recreational Trails Program administered by NJDEP.[90]

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84 www.nj.gov/njhighlands/preservation/tracking/land_pres_rpts/LandPres_2022.pdf.

85 highbridge.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Open-Space-and-Recreation-Plan-2020.pdf.

86 www.boontontownship.com/news/post/19318/.

87 thetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com/sites/NJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan/_layouts/15/AccessDenied.aspx?Source=https%3A%2F%2Fthetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com%2Fsites%2FNJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan%2FShared+Documents%2FMunicipal+%26+County+Open+Space+%26+Preservation+Plans_Highlands+Council+Files%2FExisting+OSRP%2FAlpha+Open+Space+and+Recreation+Plan+2024.pdf%3Fcsf%3D1%26web%3D1%26e%3DGcBLKR%26CID%3D06463f76-1063-48e9-81ea-5ebfdb0979c6&correlation=57911ba2-e07a-d000-700a-bace398bef6c&Type=item&name=9a21db75-b708-4a32-abbb-cad94006c9fc&listItemId=145&listItemUniqueId=a2091de1-9267-41c8-8659-8013ea5f531e&allowautoredirecttosource=true.

88 www.califonboro.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Califon-OSRP-Final-Draft-4-17-2023.pdf.

89 thetrustforpublicland.sharepoint.com/_forms/default.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2fsites%2fNJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan%2f_layouts%2f15%2fAuthenticate.aspx%3fSource%3d%252Fsites%252FNJHighlandsOpenSpaceRecreationPlan%252FShared%2520Documents%252FMunicipal%2520%2526%2520County%2520Open%2520Space%2520%2526%2520Preservation%2520Plans%255FHighlands%2520Council%2520Files%252FExisting%2520OSRP%252FChester%2520Borough%2520OSRP%2520Final%252D%252010%252E17%252E2023%252Epdf%253FCT%253D1757695400481%2526OR%253DItemsView&Source=cookie.

90 www.byramtwp.org/useruploads/docs/Byram_OSRP_63020.pdf.

Notable Projects

The following major land use, geospatial, and planning projects in or adjacent to the Highlands Region are currently underway or recently completed.

- The New Jersey Trails Playbook led by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection will comprise statewide trail planning documents to consolidate resources to support statewide trail planning.[91]
- The New Jersey Conservation Blueprint+ by the Nature Conservancy, Rowan University and the New Jersey Conservation Foundation is a vector-based tool that aggregates the Conservation Blueprint raster data into individual parcels.
- The State Land Acquisition Boundary Project led by the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife will develop a standard method to acquire lands for key wildlife corridors needed to protect or restore habitats throughout the state (as of the writing of this document, this project is not yet published online).
- Highlands Rail Trail led by the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority is a two-mile pedestrian and bicycle greenway in Passaic County. Phase I was completed in September of 2025.[92]
- Morris Canal Greenway Plan (2018) led by the North Jersey Transportation Authority identifies a continuous pedestrian and bicycle route, following a 102-mile path of the historic Morris Canal across six counties.[93]

Conclusion

In summation, there is much alignment between the Highlands Council OSRP and existing open space preservation, recreation, and farmland preservation efforts undertaken by communities within and adjacent to the Highlands Region. At the center, one value rings true for all communities: the economic, public health, and social benefits of having a highly functioning park and open space system are foundational to the daily lives of residents.

Importantly, the Highlands Council OSRP will further elaborate on existing park inequities, highlighting where these inequities exist and how funding and land acquisition can be positioned to address them. Lastly, it is made clear that all communities are grappling with funding gaps for preservation and recreation efforts. There is a consistent need for established and continuous annual funding at the regional and local levels necessary for communities to realize their visions and relish the full benefits of high functioning parks and open spaces.

91 dep.nj.gov/newsrel/25_00224/#:~:text=The%20New%20Jersey%20Trails%20Playbook%20is%20a%20series%20of%20statewide,connecting%20trails%20throughout%20the%20state.

92 www.njtpa.org/Newsroom/NJTPA-News/NJPTA-Update-Blog/2025/October-2025/Passaic-County-opens-the-Highlands-Rail-Trail.aspx.

93 www.njtpa.org/NJTPA/media/Documents/Planning/Regional-Programs/Studies/Morris%20Canal%20Greenway%20Study/180628_MCG_Final-Report_Entire.pdf?ext=.pdf.

Appendix C.
GIS Criteria Matrix for Highlands OSRP

This document outlines the Trust for Public Land's GIS approach for the Highlands Region parcel analysis and level of service analysis. It describes the datasets, source, and analysis methodologies used to score parcels for conservation in the Highlands Region for the 2026 Open Space and Recreation Plan. Additional questions should be addressed to the Highlands Council GIS department via email at GIS.mailbox@highlands.nj.gov.

Parcel Analysis

The Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan identifies regional goals in open space conservation, outdoor recreation, and agricultural preservation. Many of the goals rely on map-based criteria to identify parcels that will help communities reach these goals. For more information on the analysis, see the Parcel Scoring Analysis section of the OSRP.

For each metric, unpreserved parcels are ranked on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 representing the highest score. Details on the data source and methodology are described below.

Recreation

OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRAIL CONTINUITY

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Statewide Trails in New Jersey (2025), NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/njdep::statewide-trails-in-new-jersey-2/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their distance to proposed or potential trails, identified using the NJ Statewide trails database.

Unconserved parcels with proposed or potential trails on them receive the highest score of 10. Adjoining parcels to existing trails up to 1 mile are scored with a range of 1–9 based on distance away from existing trails, with those that are closer getting higher scores up to 9 and those that are further away receiving lower scores down to 1. Those that are further than 1 mile receive a score of 0.

Parcels that score higher offer opportunities to conserve areas that promote connectivity to proposed or potential trails.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels with proposed or potential trails on them.

A 0-score represents: Any parcels that are further than one mile from a trail.

ADJACENT TO WATERBODIES

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

National Hydrography Dataset – Waterbodies and Large Perennial Streams (2025), U.S. Geological Survey (USGS): www.usgs.gov/national-hydrography/national-hydrography-dataset

Slope Dataset (2025), USGS: apps.nationalmap.gov/downloader/

Statewide Trails in New Jersey (2025), NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/njdep::statewide-trails-in-new-jersey-2/about

Great Fishing Close to Home in New Jersey (2025), NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/great-fishing-close-to-home-in-new-jersey-2/about

Open Access Boat Ramps (2025), Center for Remote Sensing and Spatial Analysis, Rutgers School of Environmental and Biological Sciences (John Bognar), crssa.rutgers.edu/people/johnb/

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their distance to water bodies and perennial streams.

Parcels adjacent to waterbodies and large perennial streams that have a water trail or known fishing and boat access are scored on scale of 6 to 10, with those that have lower mean slope values (based on topography data) getting higher scores up to 10, and those that have higher mean scores getting lower values down to 6. (When prioritizing areas for water body access, steep slopes are less favorable for facilitating access.)

Parcels adjacent to waterbodies and perennial streams that do not have an existing water trail, boat ramp of fishing access point are scored on scale of 1–5, with those that have lower mean slope values getting higher scores up to 5 and those that have higher mean scores getting lower values down to 1.

Parcels that score higher offer opportunities to improve connections to waterbodies for water-based outdoor recreation or conserve parcels that directly impact water quality in those water bodies.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels within 100 meters of lakes, ponds, reservoirs greater than 10 acres, and large perennial streams, with a water trail of known fishing and boat access, with a low mean slope value.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that are not within 100 meters of these water bodies.

OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT WITH EXISTING CONSERVED LANDS

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Preserved Lands (version 4.0), NJ Highlands Council: highlands-data-njhighlands.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/NJHighlands::preserved-lands/about

ParkServe Dataset (2025), Trust for Public Land: server7.tplgis.org/arcgis7/rest/services/ParkServe/ParkServe_Shareable/MapServer

National Conservation Easements Database (2025), Trust for Public Land: conservationeasement.us/

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their proximity to existing conserved lands that provide opportunities for passive recreation.

Passive recreation is defined as preserved lands from the NJ Highlands Council preserved lands database that have passive open space use (os_use) types. This data layer is created by removing all preserved lands that have the following os_use types: Park, Playground, Conservation Easement, Golf, Field, Farm, Fairground, Canal, Center, Ravine and Rifle Range.

Unconserved parcels up to 100 meters from the remaining passive recreation lands receive a score from 1 to 10 based on the percentage of natural landcover types on the parcel. Natural landcover types include forest, wetland and water. All other parcels receive a 0. Selected parcels are then ranked based on percentage of forests, wetlands and water on the property between 1 through 10. Those that have greater percentages of these natural landcover types get higher scores up to 10.

Parcels that score higher offer opportunities to improve connectivity between conserved lands and reduce fragmentation of open space.

A 10-score represents: Parcels that are adjacent to existing conserved lands and that have the highest percent coverage of natural landcover types (as they facilitate passive recreation opportunities).

A 0-score represents: Parcels that are not adjacent to existing conserved lands that provide opportunities for passive recreation.

Connectivity and Multi-modal Transportation

TRANSPORTATION ACCESS SCORE

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Transportation Score Greater than or Equal to 3 (2025), NJ Highlands Council: highlands-data-njhighlands.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/NJHighlands::transportation-score-greater-than-or-equal-to-3-1/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their overlap with the Highlands Council transportation score data layer.

The Highlands Council created Transit Areas by identifying clusters of multimodal opportunities throughout the Highlands Region. The purpose was to better understand the nature of regional development patterns, and to identify existing interfaces between land use and roadway-transit networks that may inform future land use intensity. Areas with existing development that are also served by multimodal transportation opportunities support RMP policies as lands potentially appropriate for development and redevelopment in support of smart growth principles.

Unconserved parcels that are within a Highlands Transit Area are given a score of 10. The distance to the transportation access priority areas for the remaining parcels are calculated and broken into classes using natural breaks and receive scores between 1 through 9, where greater distances receive lower scores up to 1 mile and those that are closer a score up to 9. Parcels more than 1 mile away receive a score of 0.

Parcels that score higher offer the opportunity to conserve lands near regional multimodal opportunities.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels that are located within a Highlands Transit Area.

A 0-score represents: Parcels more than one mile away from a Highlands Transit Area.

PROXIMITY TO EXISTING TRAILS

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Statewide Trails in New Jersey (2025), NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/njdep::statewide-trails-in-new-jersey-2/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their distance to existing trails.

Unconserved parcels that overlap the trails layer are given a score of 10. The distance to the trails for the remaining parcels are calculated and those that are up to one mile from an existing trail are broken into classes using natural breaks and receive scores between 1 through 10, where greater distances receive lower scores. Parcels that score higher offer the opportunity to conserve lands near existing trails and expand the trail network. Parcels more than one mile from an existing trail are given a score of 0.

Parcels that score higher offer opportunities to improve connectivity of outdoor recreation opportunities to the existing trail network.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels that contain an existing trail.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that are more than one mile from an existing trail.

PROXIMITY TO AREAS WITH HIGH POPULATION DENSITY

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	YES

Dataset and Source:

Highlands Boundary (2025), NJ Highlands Council: njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/NJHighlands::highlands-boundary-1/about

Census Blocks (2025), US Census: hub.arcgis.com/datasets/d795eaa6ee7a40bdb2efeb2d001bf823_0/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their distance to areas with high population density.

Population density (people per acre) was calculated at the census block level. Using population density, a quantile function was used to create three equal classes, the highest class was defined as block groups with "high population density. The distance of each parcel to these "high population density" areas are given a score from 1 to 10, with 10 representing the highest score and closest proximity to densely populated areas, and 1 representing the lowest, by using natural breaks on the distance of the parcel to the high population density areas.

Parcels that score higher offer the opportunity to conserve lands closer to areas of high population density. These areas can connect more people to outdoor recreation opportunities or connect farmers with densely populated areas to sell their products.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels that overlap parcels in high population density census blocks.

A 1-score represents: Parcels that do not overlap census blocks with high population density. (Note: there is no zero score for this metric.)

Critical Habitat

BIRD AREAS AND MIGRATORY ROUTES

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Important Bird Areas Dataset (2024), National Audubon Society: gis.audubon.org/portal/apps/sites/?_gl=1*oc5k2x*_gcl_au*NTA4MjcyMTIxLjE3ODQ5MTc0NDQ.*_ga*MTk0MjQ0MDAxNy4xNzg0OTE3NDQ1*_ga_X2XNL2MWTT*czE3ODQ5MTc0NDQkbzEkZzAkdDE3ODQ5MTc0NDQkajYwJGwwJGgw#/nas-hub-site/pages/data-review

Landscape Project Dataset v3.4 (2025), NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/documents/23737f11172e4ee7814c10ec3b396916/about;

Atlantic Coast Joint Venture Bird Focus Areas (2025), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS): gis-fws.opendata.arcgis.com/maps/708382c49eeb4e1e8303f1f3f23dfa90/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their overlap with Atlantic Coast Joint Venture focus areas (USFWS) and Important Bird Areas (National Audubon Society).

Unconserved parcels that overlap the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture focus areas and Important Bird Areas receive a score of 10. All others scored between 1–9 based on the number of overlapping Threatened and Endangered Avian species habitat polygons from the Landscape 3.4 database. Parcels that do not overlap any of the habitat polygons receive a score of 0. Parcels with greater numbers of overlapping Threatened and Endangered polygons receive higher scores up to 9, and those with lower numbers receive scores down to 1.

Parcels that score higher offer the opportunity to conserve lands that benefit the highest number of bird species.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels that overlap the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture focus areas and Important Bird Areas.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that do not overlap these areas.

CRITICAL HABITAT

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Critical Wildlife Habitat Dataset (2021), NJ Highlands Council: highlands-data-njhighlands.opendata.arcgis.com/maps/06cd4bff5f944b5c8a6800ecf74ccf4e/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their overlap with Critical Wildlife Habitat data (NJ Highlands Council).,

The Critical Wildlife Habitat layer is a subset of Landscape Project data and identifies "areas of habitat for rare, threatened and endangered species habitat (Landscape Rank 2 through 5 in the Preservation Area; Landscape Rank 2 through 5 and Highlands Rank of Critically Significant or Significant in the Planning Area)."[1] The polygons in the dataset have a value of 2–5, representing habitat value, with 5 being highest. These polygons overlap parcels, and most parcels contain multiple Landscape Rank scores. The mean value of these Landscape Rank scores was calculated for each parcel, which was then normalized using Natural Breaks to create a score from 1 to 10.

Unconserved parcels scored 1 to 10 based on the mean Landscape Rank value for each parcel. A score of 10 was given to parcels with a mean Landscape Rank of 5. A score of 0 would have been given to parcels that did not contain any Critical Wildlife Habitat polygons; however every parcel in the study area contained at least one Critical Wildlife Habitat polygon.

Parcels that score higher offer the opportunity to protect the most Critical Wildlife Habitat and protect the most rare, threatened, and endangered species.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels with the highest mean value (5 out of possible 5 for the Landscape Rank scores) based on the Critical Wildlife Habitat dataset.

A 1-score represents: Parcels with the lowest mean Landscape Rank score for Critical Habitat (2 out of 5). (Note: No parcel received a zero score for this metric.)

1 NJ Highlands Council. "Critical Wildlife Habitat." Published 2008, Updated 2021. highlands-data-njhighlands.opendata.arcgis.com/maps/06cd4bff5f944b5c8a6800ecf74ccf4e/about.

VERNAL POOLS

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Confirmed Vernal Pools 300m Buffer (2024), NJ Highlands Council: highlands-data-njhighlands.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/NJHighlands::confirmed-vernal-pools-300m-buffer/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on the distance to confirmed vernal pools.

The confirmed vernal pools dataset represents vernal pools within the NJ Highlands Region that have been field-verified by NJDEP and have been determined to meet both the physical and biological characteristics of a vernal habitat in accordance with N.J.A.C. 7:7A-1.4.[2]

Unconserved parcels that contain a Confirmed Vernal Pools get a score of 10. All others are then given a score from 1–9 based on distance to vernal pool, up to 1 mile.

Parcels that score higher offer the opportunity to protect vernal pools and may have an impact on the long term health of the vernal pool.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels that contain at least one vernal pool.

A 0-score represents: Parcels greater than one mile from a vernal pool.

2 NJ Department of Environmental Protection. "N.J.A.C. 7:7A Freshwater Wetlands Protection Act Rules." Last amended June 15, 2026. dep.nj.gov/wp-content/uploads/rules/rules/njac7_7a.pdf.

WILDLIFE CORRIDORS

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Connecting Habitat Across NJ (CHANJ) Dataset (2025), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/maps/369fd5940c614c23bfc0db57be80a21b/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their distance to wildlife corridors.

Wildlife corridors identified by selecting the "corridor" types from the CHANJ Database. (Cores are not included.) The CHANJ project represents a strategic plan for wildlife conservation that delineates and provides a common vision for a connected statewide landscape that, if protected and appropriately managed, will restore and maintain gene flow between viable breeding populations of terrestrial, native wildlife species, helping to ensure their long-term viability in New Jersey.

Unconserved parcels are ranked on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 representing the highest score. Unconserved parcels that overlap wildlife corridors get a score of 10. All others are then given a score from 1–9 based on distance to wildlife corridors up to 1 mile, with parcels closer to wildlife corridors receiving a score up to 9, and those that are further receiving lower scores down to 1.

Parcels that score higher either directly overlap a wildlife corridor, or are near one and may have an impact on the long term health of the wildlife corridor.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels that overlap wildlife corridors.

A 0-score represents: Parcels more than one mile from a wildlife corridor.

NATURAL HERITAGE PRIORITY SITES

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Natural Heritage Priority Sites in New Jersey (2023), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/maps/njdep::natural-heritage-priority-sites-in-new-jersey/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their overlap with Natural Heritage Priority sites and the biodiversity rank of those sites.

The Natural Heritage Database contains 343 Natural Heritage Priority Sites, representing some of the best remaining habitat for rare species and rare ecological communities in the state.

Unconserved parcels are ranked on a scale of 5 to 10, with 10 representing the highest score. Unconserved parcels scored based on overlap with biodiversity classes in the Natural Heritage program data, which classifies sites with a biodiversity rank from B1 (highest value) to B5 (general biodiversity interest).

Parcels that have the highest biodiversity rank (B1) are described as having, "Outstanding significance on a global level, generally the 'last of the least' in the world, such as the only known occurrence of any element (species or ecological community), the best or an excellent occurrence of an element ranked critically imperiled globally, or a concentration (4+) of good or excellent occurrences of elements that are imperiled or critically imperiled globally. The site should be viable and defensible for the elements or ecological processes contained."[3]

Lower biodiversity classes (e.g., B5) get a minimum score of 6, B4 receives a score of 7, B3 receives a score of 8, B2 receives a score of 9 and B1 receives a score of 10. Parcels adjacent up to 100 meters to any natural heritage site receive a 5. All other parcels receive a 0.

Parcels that score higher offer the strongest opportunities to protect habitat for rare species and rare ecological communities in the Highlands region.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels that overlap the B1 biodiversity class in the Natural Heritage program data.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that do not overlap the Natural Heritage program data. (Note: Scores 1–4 are not given for this metric.)

3 NJ Department of Environmental Protection. "Frequently Asked Questions about the Natural Heritage Priority Sites GIS File." March 2007. www.nj.gov/dca/divisions/sandyrecovery/pdf/Z-NATLANDS%20FAQ%202007.pdf.

SPECIAL ENVIRONMENTAL ZONE

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Special Environmental Zone (2008), NJ Highlands Council: njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/NJHighlands::special-environmental-zone/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on whether they are designated as a Special Environmental Zone.

The Special Environmental Zone in the NJ Highlands Preservation Area responds to Section 12.a of the Highlands Act, and identifies areas that should not be developed due to their importance for water resource and ecological protection. The Special Environmental Zone does not extend to the Highlands Planning Area by definition.

Unconserved parcels that are designated as a Special Environmental Zone get a score of 10. All others are given a score of 0.

Parcels that score offer opportunities to conserve lands that are important to water resources and provide ecological protection.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels are designated as Special Environmental Zone.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that do not overlap the Special Environmental Zone. (Note: Scores of 1–9 are not used in this metric.)

PROXIMITY TO NEAREST CONSERVED LAND

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Preserved Lands (2025), NJ Highlands Council: njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/NJHighlands::preserved-lands/about

Connecting Habitat Across NJ (CHANJ) Dataset (2025), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/maps/369fd5940c614c23bfc0db57be80a21b/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their proximity to existing conserved lands.

Unconserved parcels that are adjacent to conserved lands that are in the CHANJ Core Habitat core areas receive a high score of 10. All others receive a score from 1–9 based on distance up to one mile from these conserved land boundaries, with parcels closer to the conserved lands receiving a score up to 9 while those further away receive lower scores down to 1. Parcels more than one mile from a selected conserved land receive a score of 0.

Parcels that score higher offer opportunities to build a more cohesive conserved lands network for wildlife.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels that overlap the NJDEP CHANJ Core Habitat core areas.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that are more than one mile from NJDEP CHANJ Core Habitat land

CORE FOREST COVER

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Core Forests (2025), NJ Highlands Council: njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/NJHighlands::core-forest/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their percent overlap with core forest.

Interior or core forests provide important ecological values. According to the Ecosystem Management Technical (NJ Highlands Council) report, a core forest is defined as "a forest located more than 300 feet from altered land or a road".[4]

Unconserved parcels ranked from 0 to 10 based on percent of core forest cover, with parcels that have greater percentages of forest cover receiving higher scores up to 10, and those with lower percentages receiving lower scores down to 1. Parcels with no forest core overlap receive a score of 0.

Parcels that score higher offer the opportunity to protect forestland with important ecological values.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels that had the highest percentage of core forest cover (87 to 100%).

A 0-score represents: Parcels with no forest core cover.

4 NJ Highlands Council. "Ecosystem Management Technical Report." 2008. www.nj.gov/njhighlands/planning/rmp/tech_reports/tr_ecosystem_management.pdf.

Water Quality

GROUND WATER RECHARGE AREAS

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Ground Water Recharge Areas in New Jersey (2025), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/njdep::ground-water-recharge-areas-in-new-jersey/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their Drought Ground Water Recharge (DGWR) mean value.

On each unconserved parcel, the estimated mean DGWR was calculated. The DGWR refers to the volume of ground water that is naturally available for use over a drought period, considering factors like average precipitation, climate factors, soil type and land use. Mean values are broken into 10 classes using natural breaks, with higher values representing higher scores. Each parcel then receives a score of 1 to 10 based on overlapping mean DGWR value. Parcels with higher scores up to 10 can be expected to provide the greatest benefit to allowing for groundwater recharge.

Ground water recharge is calculated using the NJGS methodology from NJ Geological Survey Report GSR-32 "A Method for Evaluation of Ground-Water-Recharge Areas in New Jersey." Land-use/land-cover, soil and municipality-based climatic data were combined and used to produce an estimate of ground water recharge in inches/year.

Parcels that score higher provide greater benefits by allowing for ground water recharge during drought conditions.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels that have high ground water recharge rates and thus provide the greatest volume of ground water that is naturally available.

A 1-score represents: Parcels that contribute little to no ground water recharge. (Note: There is no zero score given in this metric.)

SURFACE WATER BUFFERS

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Open Water Protection Areas (2024), NJ Highlands Council: highlands-data-njhighlands.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/NJHighlands::riparian-area/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their total acres and percent overlap with Open Water Protection Areas.

The Highlands Ecosystem Management Technical Report states that a Highlands Open Water Protection Area is necessary "to maintain the quality and ecological integrity of streams. The Highlands Regional Master Plan includes a recommendation for a 300 foot protection area buffer around all streams and wetlands."[5]

The percentage of overlap with the Open Waters Protection Areas is calculated for each parcel. The percent overlap across all parcels are broken into 10 classes using natural breaks, with parcels with the highest percent overlap getting a higher score up to 10.

Parcels that score higher offer the opportunity to provide buffers of protection around open waters.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels with the highest percent overlap with the Open Waters Protection Area in the Highlands (95% to 100%).

A 0-score represents: Parcels that do not overlap the Open Waters Protection Area.

5 NJ Highlands Council. "Ecosystem Management Technical Report." 2008. www.nj.gov/njhighlands/planning/rmp/tech_reports/tr_ecosystem_management.pdf.

WELLHEAD PROTECTION AREAS

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Wellhead Protection Areas for Public Community Water Supply Wells in New Jersey (2025), NJ Highlands Council: njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/njdep::well-head-protection-areas-for-public-community-water-supply-wells-in-new-jersey/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their overlap with Wellhead Protection Area tier classification.

Wellhead Protection Areas (WHPAs) are "an area modeled around an unconfined Public Community Water Supply (PCWS) well in New Jersey that delineates the horizontal extent of groundwater captured by a well pumping at a specific rate over two-, five-, and twelve-year periods of time for unconfined wells and a fifty foot radius delineated around each confined PCWS well… WHPA delineations are created in compliance to the Safe Drinking Water Act Amendments of 1986 and 1996 as part of the Source Water Area Protection Program (SWAP)."[6]

Tier 1 WHPAs are in an area of land where the flow of ground water to a public water system well has a time of travel of two years. These areas are essential to protect, as any contaminated ground water can affect public water supplies within that time frame. Tier 2 WHPAs have a time of travel of five years, and Tier 3 WHPAs have a time of travel of 12 years.[7]

Tier 1 WHPAs receive a 10, Tier 2 WHPAs receive a 7, and Tier 3 WHPAs receive a 5. Parcels with no overlap with WHPAs receive a 0.

Parcels that score higher offer opportunities to protect land that significantly contributes to protecting drinking water supplies in New Jersey due to its ground water recharge characteristics.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels that overlap with Tier 1 Wellhead Protection Areas.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that do not overlap Wellhead Protection Areas. (Note: Scores of 9, 8, 6 and 1–4 are not used in this metric.)

6 New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection Bureau of GIS. "Well Head Protection Areas for Public Community Water Supply Wells in New Jersey." njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/njdep::well-head-protection-areas-for-public-community-water-supply-wells-in-new-jersey/about.

7 New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. "Guidelines for Delineation of Well Head Protection Areas in New Jersey." New Jersey Geological Survey Open-File Report OFR 03-1." Compiled by Steven E. Spayd and Stephen W. Johnson. www.nj.gov/dep/njgs/whpaguide.pdf.

CARBONATE BEDROCK LAYER

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Carbonate Bedrock Layer (2008), NJ Highlands Council: njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/NJHighlands::carbonate-rock-areas/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their overlap with the Carbonate Bedrock layer.

Managing development activities in carbonate rock areas is necessary to address potential problems common in karst landscapes. The site assessment and design process can be modified for karst areas to allow applicants, municipalities and the Council to identify any karst concerns at a site and to incorporate appropriate design features in order to minimize future sinkhole (or other karst feature) formation, damage to development, and the potential for ground water contamination.

For each parcel, the percentage of overlap with the Carbonate Bedrock layer is calculated. The values for percentage overlap across all parcels are broken into 10 classes using natural breaks, with parcels with greater total acreages getting a higher score.

Parcels that score higher offer opportunities to provide protection of Carbonate Bedrock.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels with the highest percentage overlap with Carbonate Bedrock data layer.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that do not overlap the Carbonate Bedrock data layer.

Climate Resiliency

WILDFIRE RISK

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Wildfire Risk Explorer Structure Exposure Score data (2025), NJDEP, New Jersey Forest Fire Service: newjerseywildfirerisk.com/

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their wildfire risk.

For each parcel, the mean burn probability rating from the NJ Wildfire Risk Explorer database is calculated. Parcels with higher mean burn probability ratings receive higher scores up to 10 and those with lower mean burn probability ratings receive lower scores down to 1.

Parcels that score higher offer opportunities to minimize fire risk to residential and commercial property or other land use types where it is currently very high by maintaining open space.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels with the highest risk of wildfire.

A 0-score represents: Parcels with little to no exposure to wildfire risk.

FLOOD ZONES

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Rutgers NJ Inland Design Flood Elevation (FEMA 1% Chance Annual Flood Plus 3 Feet) (2025), Rutgers University: www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=4129883af8f2465091429402c39b9967#overview

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on the percent overlap with areas at risk of flooding.

The Rutgers NJ Inland Design Flood Elevation dataset "estimates the extent of an additional three feet of flooding on top of the current FEMA 1% Chance Annual Flood for New Jersey. It was created to support planning activities in accordance with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's Inland Flood Protection Rule, effective July 17, 2023. This dataset provides a crucial understanding of where Design Flood Elevations will change for new construction and redevelopment in inland/fluvial areas and can support local efforts to safeguard critical facilities and community assets."[8]

For each parcel, the percent overlap with flood zone areas is calculated. Parcels with a greater percentage of overlap get higher scores up to 10 and those with lower percent overlap receive lower scores down to 1.

Parcels that score higher offer opportunities to minimize flooding where the hazard is high.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels with the greatest percentage overlap with the NJ Inland Design Flood Elevation data layer.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that do not overlap with the NJ Inland Design Flood Elevation data layer.

8 Rutgers-New Brunswick New Jersey Climate Change Resource Center. "Rutgers NJ Inland Design Flood Elevation Layer." Access July 2026. www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=3cb5ca51630743b7b3ecdb0e360c89ba#overview.

Historic and Cultural Significance

AREAS WITH CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Historic Property Features of New Jersey (2025), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/search?groupIds=b9667cb1c4ec4263ac9293a43850874c&q=cultural significance

Historic Districts of New Jersey (2025), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/njdep::historic-districts-of-new-jersey/about

METHODOLOGY: Parcels were scored based on overlap with the Historic Property Features of New Jersey and Historic Districts of New Jersey data.

Parcels that overlap a historic feature received 10 points; parcels that overlap a historic district received 5 points. If the parcel overlaps both a historic district and has a historic feature, it will receive a 10.

Parcels that score higher offer opportunities to protect historic features that help define the culture and character of the Highlands region.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels with a historic feature based on NJ HPO data.

A 5-score represents: Unconserved parcels that are within a historic district, but do not contain an historic feature.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that do not have historic features or are located within a historic district. (Note: Scores of 6–9 and 1–4 are not used in this metric.)

AREAS ALONG SCENIC BYWAYS

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Scenic Byways Significant Location Markers (2022), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/c3f9563637c04b3b96e4a6984fd1a092

Scenic Resource Areas (2024), NJ Highlands Council: njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/NJHighlands::scenic-resources/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on the overlap with Scenic Byways and NJ Highlands Council Scenic Resource Areas.

Scenic byways include sites and landscapes that are distinctive and remarkable for their geology, topography, history, culture, and aesthetics or can be representative of the defining character of a community. They may include prominent ridgelines, mountainsides or hillsides, panoramic vistas, community gateways and landmarks, river valleys and agricultural landscapes.

Scenic Resource Areas are identified as 131 publicly owned parks, forests, and recreation areas. Parcels that score higher offer opportunities to protect scenic byways and areas that contribute to the character and culture of the Highlands Region.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels that are within 100-meters of a scenic byway significant location marker point.

A 7-score represents: Unconserved parcels that are within a scenic resource area.

A 0-score represents: Parcels further than 100 meters of a scenic byway significant location marker point and are outside a scenic resource area. (Note: Scores of 8–9 and 1–6 are not used in this metric.)

PROXIMITY TO HISTORIC TRAILS

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Washington Rochambeau National Historic Trail (2025), National Park Service (NPS): www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=839d48f9ee7047509d7ea9868819c978#overview

Statewide Trails in New Jersey (2025), NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/njdep::statewide-trails-in-new-jersey-2/about

Highlands Trail Protection Buffer (2025), NY NJ Trails Conference: www.nynjtc.org/

9/11 Trail (2025), National 9/11 Memorial Trail: www.911trail.org/

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their distance to select Historic Trails (the Washington Rochambeau National Historic Trail, The Morris Canal Greenway, Appalachian National Scenic Trail, Patriot's Path Trail, the Highlands Trail or the 9–11 Trail). The NJNY Trails Conference applies a 0.1 mile buffer to the Highlands Trail; similarly, TPL created a buffer for all others trails (including 9/11, Patriots Path, Morris Canal Greenway, Appalachian Trail and Washinton-Rochambeau).[9]

Unconserved parcels that are with a 0.1 mile conservation zone that buffers the trail receive a score of 10, while all others receive a score from 1 (further from the trail conservation zone buffer) to 9 (closer to the trail conservation zone buffer) based on distance from the trail centerline up to 1 mile.

Parcels that score higher offer opportunities to conserve areas around the trail that can enhance visitors' experience and maintain trail condition.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels that are with a 0.1 mile conservation zone to the Washington Rochambeau National Historic Trail, The Morris Canal Greenway, Appalachian National Scenic Trail, Patriot's Path Trail, the Highlands Trail or the 9–11 Trail.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that are greater than one mile away from any of the Historic Trails.

9 The NYNJ Trails Conference includes a buffer area 0.1 miles from the trail's centerline on either side, based on the average width of the Appalachian Trail (1,000 ft) and rounded to the nearest tenth of a mile. "For conservation purposes, parcels that fall within this zone could potentially be helpful for either rerouting onto protected lands, or creating a large buffer of protected land." TPL applied the same principle to the Highlands Trail, creating a buffer for protection opportunities without getting into detailed specifics of exact preferred trail corridors. (Personal Communication, Jeremy Apgar, NYNJ Trails Conference).

WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

National Wild and Scenic River Segments (2025), United States Forest Service (USFS), National Park Service (NPS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS): usfs.hub.arcgis.com/datasets/usfs::national-wild-and-scenic-river-segments/about?layer=1

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their distance to designated Wild and Scenic Rivers.

According to the USFWS, "the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System was created by Congress in 1968 to preserve certain rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations. Rivers may be designated by Congress or, if certain requirements are met, the Secretary of the Interior. Each river is administered by either a federal or state agency."[10]

Parcels that are adjacent to a Wild and Scenic River receive a score of 10. All others receive a score from 1–9 based on distance from the wild and scenic river centerline, up to 1 mile. Parcels that are greater than one mile away receive a score of 0.

Parcels that score higher offer opportunities to conserve areas around the Wild and Scenic River that can enhance the experience and maintain river condition.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels that are adjacent to a Wild and Scenic River.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that are more than one mile away from a Wild and Scenic River.

10 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "National Wild and Scenic Rivers System." 2026. www.fws.gov/rivers/.

Open Space & Farmland

UNPROTECTED FARMLAND

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	YES

Dataset and Source:

Unpreserved Farmlands Dataset (2024), NJ Highlands Council: services6.arcgis.com/ZrVlS0wslq8Nvq5I/arcgis/rest/services/NJHC_Unpreserved_Farmland/FeatureServer

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their overlap with unprotected farmland.

Unconserved parcels are ranked on a binary scale of 0 or 10, with 10 representing the highest score. If a parcel overlaps unpreserved farmland, then it receives a score of 10. Parcels that do not overlap unpreserved farmland receive a score of 0.

Parcels that score highest offer opportunities to preserve farmland.

A 10-score represents: Parcels that overlap unpreserved farmland.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that do not overlap unpreserved farmland.

HIGH-QUALITY FARMLAND SOILS

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	YES

Dataset and Source:

Important Farmland Soils (Undeveloped) (2021), NJ Highlands Council: njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/NJHighlands::important-farmland-soils-undeveloped/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on the presence of high-quality farmland soils.

Unconserved parcels are ranked on scale of 0, 5, 6, 8 or 10, with 10 representing the highest score. All parcels that overlap prime farmland soils receive a score of 10. Parcels that overlap soils of statewide importance receive an 8; parcels that overlap unique soils, receive a 6; parcels that overlap statewide importance if drained receive a 5. All other parcels receive a 0.

The purpose of the Important Farmland Soils dataset is to "provide an accurate resource area based on important farmland soils… This type of soil is an important factor in determining the productivity of farmland." The dataset is a subset of the Natural Resources Conservation Services' (NRCS) Soil Survey Geographic Database (SSURGO) of Farmland soils. The area is used for planning purposes and for the implementation of the Highlands Regional Master Plan.[11]

Parcels that score highly offer opportunities to preserve farmland where soils will be most productive.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels that overlap prime farmland soils.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that do not overlap high-quality farmland soils. (Note: Scores 9, 7 and 1–4 were not used in this metric.)

11 NJ Highlands Council. "Important Farmland Soils, Undeveloped." njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/NJHighlands::important-farmland-soils-undeveloped/about.

ADJACENT TO PRESERVED FARMS

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	YES

Dataset and Source:

Preserved Farmland Database (2023), NJ State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC): njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/NJDASADC::preserved-farmland-of-new-jersey-/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their distance to existing preserved farmland.

The New Jersey Farmland Preservation Program (NJFPP) dataset was developed as a geospatial inventory of farms preserved by the NJ SADC and its partners. The dataset represents the current configuration of the preserved farms reflecting approved and completed post-preservation subdivisions and lot consolidations.

Parcels adjacent (up to 100 ft) to a preserved farmland receive a score of 10. Other parcels received a score based on the degree of concentration of farms in their area. Density was calculated by creating a Kernal Density raster, where each raster cell value represents the number of preserved farms within 1 mile of the cell. Each parcel receives a score from 1–9 depending on the maximum density value that overlaps the parcel.

Parcels that scored higher offer opportunities to support connectivity between farmland, protecting scenic vistas in the Highlands Region and protecting its rural character.

A 10-score represents: Unprotected parcels within 100 feet of existing preserved farmland.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that do not have existing preserved farmland within 1 mile.

Economic and Community Development

DEVELOPMENT PRESSURE

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	YES

Dataset and Source:

Highlands Development Pressure Dataset (2025), NJ Highlands Council: njhighlands.maps.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=6d43fb9a3f134ab3ab95d9f9ed63ba2e#overview

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on the level of development pressure they face.

The Development Pressure layer was formulated by the NJ Highlands Council and represents the potential for development pressures based on a variety of current designations at the parcel level.

The NJ Highlands Council Development Threat layer classifies areas on a 5-point scale; parcels receiving 5 points face the highest development pressures while parcels that receive a score of 1 indicates that initial development pressure factors are present. These scores were converted from the original scale of 1 to 5 to 6 to 10 to reflect the scoring methodology of the OSRP Parcel Scoring Analysis (i.e., a 5-score in the data layer reflects the highest-possible risk of development, which scores a 10 in the OSRP analysis). For more information, see the OSRP report section on the Development Pressure layer.

A 10-score represents: Unprotected parcels with the highest risk of development.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that are not at risk of development (as they are protected, water, or in an HOA) or are suitable for development (as they are in a Highlands Center).

OVERBURDENED COMMUNITY

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Environmental Justice (EJ) Law Combined Stressor Summary for New Jersey Overburdened Community attribute (2025), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/njdep::environmental-justice-ej-law-combined-stressor-summary-current/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their distance to NJ Overburdened Communities (OBCs).

Each parcel receives a score based on its distance, up to one mile, from block groups that have been designated as 'Overburdened Communities' in the Environmental Justice (EJ) Combined Stressor Summary for New Jersey.[12] Parcels that directly overlap an Overburdened block group receive a score of 10. All others receive a score from 0 to 9 based on distance from the overburdened community block group, up to 1 mile. Parcels that are closer receive a score up to 9 and those that are further receive a score down to 1. Parcels that are greater than one mile away receive a score of 0.

Parcels that score higher offer opportunities to conserve areas in or near overburdened communities and address equity gaps in access to outdoor recreation.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels that directly overlap NJ Overburdened Communities.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that are more than one mile from designated NJ Overburdened Communities.

12 NJDEP. "Environmental Justice: What are Overburdened Communities (OBCs)?" dep.nj.gov/ej/communities/.

LACK OF RECREATION OPEN SPACE

Included in Recreation theme overall score?	YES
Included in Conservation theme overall score?	NO
Included in Agriculture theme overall score?	NO

Dataset and Source:

Environmental Justice (EJ) Law Combined Stressor Summary (2025), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/njdep::environmental-justice-ej-law-combined-stressor-summary-current/about

Methodology: Parcels are scored based on their overlap with areas currently designated as lacking open space.

NJDEP created the EJ Law Combined Stressor dataset to identify the Environmental and Public Health Stressors for each block group in New Jersey. The dataset is used to help implement EJ Law, which addresses communities that experience more public health and environmental stressors compared to other communities in New Jersey. This may mean sources of environmental pollution (such as air pollution, contaminated sites, and solid waste facilities) or conditions that may cause potential public health impacts, such as asthma, cancer, and cardiovascular disease.[13] One of the 26 stressors they calculate at the block group level is lack of open space, which limits opportunities for recreation and relaxation and increases ambient temperature due to lack of tree canopy.[14]

Each block group is scored based on the Lack of Open Space by NJDEP in the Combined Stressor Summary dataset, based on population per acre of open space within a quarter mile. TPL then scored individual parcels based on the mean score for the block groups they overlap. These values are then broken into ten classes using natural breaks.

Parcels that score higher offer opportunities to conserve areas near populations that currently lack open space, with the highest-scoring parcels identifying the areas that would provide open space to the most number of people who currently do not have nearby access.

A 10-score represents: Unconserved parcels with the most people living nearby who lack open space near home.

A 0-score represents: Parcels that do not overlap areas designated as lacking open space.

13 NJDEP. "Environmental Justice (EJ) Law Combined Stressor Summary (Current)." njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/njdep::environmental-justice-ej-law-combined-stressor-summary-current/about.

14 NJDEP. "Environmental Justice Action Plan." December 2025. dep.nj.gov/wp-content/uploads/ej/environmentaljusticeactionplan_dec2025.pdf.

Level of Service Analysis

The Level of Service Analysis for the OSRP quantifies how well the existing open space and recreational assets within the Highlands Region meet the needs of its residents. For more information on this analysis, visit the Level of Service Analysis section in the OSRP.

Ten-minute drive service areas are generated using TPL's Custom Access Toolbox. The Custom Access Toolbox generates 10-minute drive service areas from parks or other custom access points and uses a nationwide road network dataset provided by Esri to create the service area polygons from each access point. The service area model identifies physical barriers such as highways, train tracks, and rivers without bridges and chooses routes without barriers.

HIKING

Service Areas by Activity Type: 10-minute drivetime access to hiking trail-based recreation

Dataset and Source:

gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/statewide-trails-in-new-jersey-2/explore Statewide Trails in New Jersey (2025), NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/njdep::statewide-trails-in-new-jersey-2/about

NJ Highlands Open Space Assessment project Comprehensive Conserved Lands Dataset (2026), Trust for Public Land: accessible by contacting the NJ Highlands Council

Methodology: Using the NJ Statewide Trails data that intersects publicly accessible conserved lands within the Comprehensive Conserved Lands Dataset, conserved lands containing hiking trails were selected and 10-minute drivetime service areas for each park were created to identify where there may be gaps in access to conserved lands within the Highland region for this activity type.

MULTI-PURPOSE TRAILS

Service Areas by Activity Type: 10-minute drivetime access to multi-purpose trail-based recreation

Dataset and Source:

Statewide Trails in New Jersey (2025), NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/njdep::statewide-trails-in-new-jersey-2/about

NJ Highlands Open Space Assessment project Comprehensive Conserved Lands Dataset (2026), Trust for Public Land: accessible by contacting the NJ Highlands Council

Methodology: Using the NJ Statewide Trails data that intersects publicly accessible conserved lands within the Comprehensive Conserved Lands Dataset, conserved lands containing multi-use trails were selected and 10-minute drivetime service areas for each park were created to identify where there may be gaps in access to conserved lands within the Highland region for this activity type.

ADA-TRAIL BASED RECREATION

Service Areas by Activity Type: 10-minute drivetime access to American with Disabilities Act (ADA) trail-based recreation

Dataset and Source:

Statewide Trails in New Jersey (2025), NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/njdep::statewide-trails-in-new-jersey-2/about

NJ Highlands Open Space Assessment project Comprehensive Conserved Lands Dataset (2026), Trust for Public Land: accessible by contacting the NJ Highlands Council

Methodology: Using the NJ Statewide Trails data that intersects publicly accessible conserved lands within the Comprehensive Conserved Lands Dataset, conserved lands containing ADA compliant trails were selected and 10-minute drivetime service areas for each park were created to identify where there may be gaps in access to conserved lands within the Highland region for this activity type.

BIRDING

Service Areas by Activity Type: 10-minute drivetime access to Potential Birding Sites

Dataset and Source:

Birdability Map(2025), National Audubon Society: gis.audubon.org/birdability/

eBird Basic Dataset (2024), Cornell Lab of Ornithology: ebird.org/about/download-ebird-data-products

NJ Highlands Open Space Assessment project Comprehensive Conserved Lands Dataset (2026), Trust for Public Land: accessible by contacting the NJ Highlands Council

Methodology: Publicly accessible, conserved lands within the Comprehensive Conserved Lands Dataset were selected that overlap Audubon Birdability areas and ebird hotspots (occurrences count greater than 10 for in the 2024 eBird data). A 10-minute drivetime service area for each park was created from selected parcels to identify where there may be gaps in access to conserved lands within the Highland region for this activity type.

HUNTING

Service Areas by Activity Type: 10-minute drivetime access to hunting based recreation

Dataset and Source:

NJDEP Places to Hunt Dataset (2025), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP): dep.nj.gov/njfw/hunting/where-to-go/[15]

NJ Highlands Open Space Assessment project Comprehensive Conserved Lands Dataset (2026), Trust for Public Land: accessible by contacting the NJ Highlands Council

Methodology: Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs), State Parks, and USFWS National Wildlife Refuges (NWRs) were selected from the Comprehensive Conserved Lands Dataset (using the open space use (os_use) field). Ten-minute drivetime service areas were then created for each park to identify where there may be gaps in access to conserved lands within the Highland region for this activity type.

BOAT LAUNCHES

Service Areas by Activity Type: 10-minute drivetime access to boat launches

Dataset and Source:

Great Fishing Close to Home in New Jersey (2025), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/great-fishing-close-to-home-in-new-jersey-2/about

Open Access Boat Ramps (NJ_BoatRamps202210_OA_Proj_Select) (2023), Center for Remote Sensing and Spatial Analysis (CRSSA), Rutgers School of Environmental and Biological Sciences: crssa.rutgers.edu/people/johnb/[16]

National Hydrography Dataset (NHD) Streams and Waterbodies 2015 for New Jersey (2022), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Bureau of GIS: njogis-newjersey.opendata.arcgis.com/documents/247f2f76682843109eafc881d7a2c0bf/about

NJ Highlands Open Space Assessment project Comprehensive Conserved Lands Dataset (2026), Trust for Public Land: accessible by contacting the NJ Highlands Council

Methodology: Using open access boat ramps from the "Great Fishing New Jersey" data and the "NJ Boat Ramp" data from NJ Sea Grant that intersects publicly accessible conserved lands within the Comprehensive Conserved Lands Dataset, conserved lands containing public access boat ramps were selected and 10-minute drivetime service areas for each park where they are located were created to identify where there may be gaps in access to conserved lands within the Highland region for this activity type.

15 Note: The NJDEP website lists the types of public lands in New Jersey where hunting is allowed. TPL used this website as guidance to select areas in the conserved lands data layer to identify Wildlife Management Areas, State Parks, and National Wildlife Refuges.

16 Note: John Bognar at CRSSA shared NJ Sea Grant Boat Ramp data directly with TPL in April 2025.

FISHING

Service Areas by Activity Type: 10-minute drivetime access to fishing

Dataset and Source:

Great Fishing Close to Home in New Jersey (2025), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP), Bureau of GIS: gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/great-fishing-close-to-home-in-new-jersey-2/about

NJ Highlands Open Space Assessment project Comprehensive Conserved Lands Dataset (2026), Trust for Public Land: accessible by contacting the NJ Highlands Council

Methodology: Using open access lakes, ponds and reservoirs from the "Great Fishing New Jersey" data that intersects publicly accessible conserved lands within the Comprehensive Conserved Lands Dataset, conserved lands containing public access fishing locations were selected and 10-minute drivetime service areas for each location were created to identify where there may be gaps in access to conserved lands within the Highland region for this activity type.

SWIMMING

Service Areas by Activity Type: 10-minute drivetime access to swimming

Dataset and Source:

Great Fishing Close to Home in New Jersey (2025), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP), Bureau of GIS: gisdata-njdep.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/great-fishing-close-to-home-in-new-jersey-2/about

NJ Highlands Open Space Assessment project Comprehensive Conserved Lands Dataset (2026), Trust for Public Land: accessible by contacting the NJ Highlands Council

Methodology: NJDEP's Great Fishing Close to Home data also includes designated publicly accessible swimming areas. These swimming locations were used as access points rather than the associated park boundary for generating 10-minute drivetime service areas.

Appendix D.

New Jersey Open Space Tax Law and Definitions

Title 40 – Municipalities and Counties

Section 40:12-15.1 – Definitions relative to recreation, conservation, floodplain protection, farmland, and historic preservation.

40:12-15.1 Definitions relative to recreation, conservation, floodplain protection, farmland, and historic preservation.

1. As used in P.L.1997, c.24 (C.40:12-15.1 et seq.):

"Acquisition" or "acquire" means the securing of a fee simple or a lesser interest in land, including but not limited to an easement restricting development, by gift, purchase, installment purchase agreement, devise, or condemnation, and includes the demolition of structures on, the removal of debris from, and the restoration of those lands to a natural state or to a state useful for recreation and conservation purposes.

"Blue Acres project" means any project to acquire, for recreation and conservation purposes, lands that have been damaged by, or may be prone to incurring damage caused by, storms or storm-related flooding, or that may buffer or protect other lands from such damage, and includes the demolition of structures on, the removal of debris from, and the restoration of those lands to a natural state or to a state useful for recreation and conservation purposes.

"Charitable conservancy" means a corporation or trust exempt from federal income taxation under paragraph (3) of subsection (c) of section 501 of the federal Internal Revenue Code of 1986 (26 U.S.C. s.501(c)(3)), whose purposes include (1) acquisition and preservation of lands in a natural, scenic, or open condition, or (2) historic preservation of historic properties, structures, facilities, sites, areas, or objects, or the acquisition of such properties, structures, facilities, sites, areas, or objects for historic preservation purposes.

"County trust fund" means a "County Open Space, Recreation, Floodplain Protection, and Farmland and Historic Preservation Trust Fund" created pursuant to subsection c. of section 2 of P.L.1997, c.24 (C.40:12-15.2).

"Development" means any improvement to land acquired for recreation and conservation purposes designed to expand and enhance its utilization for those purposes.

"Farmland" means land actively devoted to agricultural or horticultural use that is valued, assessed, and taxed pursuant to the "Farmland Assessment Act of 1964," P.L.1964, c.48 (C.54:4-23.1 et seq.).

"Farmland preservation purposes" means the long-term preservation of farmland for agricultural or horticultural use.

"Historic preservation" means the performance of any work relating to the stabilization, repair, rehabilitation, renovation, restoration, improvement, protection, or preservation of an historic property, structure, facility, site, area, or object.

"Historic property, structure, facility, site, area, or object" means any property, structure, facility, site, area, or object approved for inclusion, or which meets the criteria for inclusion, in the New Jersey Register of Historic Places pursuant to P.L.1970, c.268 (C.13:1B-15.128 et seq.).

"Land" or "lands" means real property, including improvements thereof or thereon, rights-of-way, water, lakes, riparian and other rights, easements, privileges and all other rights or interests of any kind or description in, relating to or connected with real property.

"Municipal trust fund" means a "Municipal Open Space, Recreation, Floodplain Protection, and Farmland and Historic Preservation Trust Fund" created pursuant to subsection c. of section 7 of P.L.1997, c.24 (C.40:12-15.7).

"Public indoor recreation" means public recreation in enclosed structures or facilities, and includes but is not limited to swimming pools, basketball courts, and ice skating rinks open for public use.

"Recreation and conservation purposes" means the use of lands for parks, open space, natural areas, ecological and biological study, forests, water reserves, wildlife preserves, fishing, hunting, camping, boating, winter sports, or similar uses for either public outdoor recreation or conservation of natural resources, or both, or the use of lands for public indoor recreation.

Title 40 – Municipalities and Counties

Section 40:12-15.2 – Submission by county of proposition authorizing annual levy

40:12-15.2 Submission by county of proposition authorizing annual levy.

2. a. (1) The governing body of any county may submit to the voters of the county in a general or special election a proposition authorizing imposition of an annual levy for an amount or at a rate deemed appropriate for any or all of the following purposes, or any combination thereof, as determined by the governing body:

(a) acquisition of lands for recreation and conservation purposes;

(b) development of lands acquired for recreation and conservation purposes;

(c) maintenance of lands acquired for recreation and conservation purposes;

(d) acquisition of farmland for farmland preservation purposes;

(e) historic preservation of historic properties, structures, facilities, sites, areas, or objects, and the acquisition of such properties, structures, facilities, sites, areas, or objects for historic preservation purposes;

(f) payment of debt service on indebtedness issued or incurred by a county for any of the purposes set forth in subparagraph (a), (b), (d), (e) or (g) of this paragraph; or

(g) Blue Acres projects.

(2) The amount or rate of the annual levy may be subdivided in the proposition to reflect the relative portions thereof to be allocated to any of the respective purposes specified in paragraph (1) of this subsection or may be depicted as a total amount or rate, to be subdivided in a manner determined previously, or to be determined at a later date, by the governing body of the county after conducting at least one public hearing thereon.

b. Upon approval of the proposition by a majority of the votes cast by the voters of the county, the governing body of the county may annually raise by taxation a sum not to exceed the amount or rate set forth in the proposition approved by the voters for the purposes specified therein. If the amount or rate set forth in the proposition was not subdivided among the various purposes, the governing body of the county may determine the appropriate amount or rate to be allocated to each purpose after conducting at least one public hearing thereon.

c. Amounts raised by the levy imposed pursuant to this section shall be deposited into a "County Open Space, Recreation, Floodplain Protection, and Farmland and Historic Preservation Trust Fund" to be created by the county, and shall be used

exclusively for the purposes authorized by the voters of the county. Any interest or other income earned on monies deposited into the county trust fund shall be credited to the fund to be used for the same purposes as the principal. Separate accounts may be created within the county trust fund for the deposit of revenue to be expended for each of the purposes specified in the proposition approved by the voters of the county. A county may deposit other funds into the County Open Space, Recreation, Floodplain Protection, and Farmland and Historic Preservation Trust Fund, as it may, from time to time, deem appropriate.

d. (1) (a) Selection of lands for acquisition for recreation and conservation purposes shall be in accordance with an open space and recreation plan prepared and adopted by the county.

(b) Selection of projects to develop or maintain lands acquired for recreation and conservation purposes shall be in accordance with an open space and recreation development and maintenance plan prepared and adopted by the county.

(c) Selection of farmland for acquisition for farmland preservation purposes shall be in accordance with a farmland preservation plan prepared and adopted by the county or pursuant to the provisions of the "Agriculture Retention and Development Act," P.L.1983, c.32 (C.4:1C-11 et al.) or any other law enacted for the purpose of preserving farmland, or any rules or regulations adopted pursuant thereto.

(d) Selection of historic preservation projects shall be in accordance with a historic preservation plan prepared and adopted by the county.

(2) Monies in the county trust fund may be used to pay the cost of preparing and adopting the plans required by this subsection.

e. The governing body of a county may submit to the voters of the county in a general or special election a proposition amending or supplementing a proposition previously submitted, approved, and implemented as provided pursuant to this section either (1) changing the amount or rate of the annual levy, or (2) adding or removing purposes authorized pursuant to this section for which the levy may be expended. Upon approval of the amendatory or supplementary proposition by a majority of the votes cast by the voters of the county, the governing body of the county shall implement it in the same manner as set forth in P.L.1997, c.24 (C.40:12-15.1 et seq.) for implementation of the original proposition.

f. Upon petition to the governing body of a county signed by the voters of the county equal in number to at least 15% of the votes cast therein at the last preceding general election, filed with the governing body at least 90 days before a general or special election, the governing body of the county shall submit to the voters of the county in the general or special election the proposition otherwise authorized pursuant to subsection a. or subsection e. of this section, as the case may be.

Appendix E.

Conservation Finance Funding Landscape – New Jersey Highlands

By Municipality

Data Source: LandVote.Org

Municipality	County	Date of last open space measure	Funding Mechanism	Description	Conservation Funds Approved	P/F	%Y	%N	Notes
Mahwah Township	Bergen	11/4/2003	Property tax	Municipal Question 1, 1 cent per $100 property tax continuation for open space, recreation, farmland, historic preservation	$4,000,000	Pass	59%	41%	
Oakland Borough	Bergen	11/7/2023	Property tax	10-year, Continuation of up to 1-cent per $100 property tax for the preservation of open space	$3,005,418	Pass	71%	29%	Expires 2033
Califon Borough	Hunterdon	11/6/2001	Property tax	Resolution 2001–71; 5-year, 2 cent, non-binding property tax increase for conservation, recreation and farmland preservation (est. $87,475)	$88,470	Pass	68%	32%	
Glen Gardner Borough	Hunterdon	11/6/2001	Property tax	Resolution 2001–42; 5-year, 1 cent, non-binding property tax increase for conservation, recreation, farmland and historic preservation (est. $47,529)	$47,550	Pass	73%	27%	
Lebanon Township	Hunterdon	11/5/2002	Property tax	2¢ per $100 property tax increase for open space, farmland, conservation easements (non-binding)	$2,896,900	Pass	66%	34%	
Bethlehem Township	Hunterdon	11/2/1999	Property tax	Property tax increase for open space, farmland preservation, parks and recreation	$2,500,000	Pass	61%	39%	

Municipality	County	Date of last open space measure	Funding Mecha-nism	Description	Conservation Funds Approved	P/F	%Y	%N	Notes
Alexandria Township	Hunterdon	11/8/2005	Property tax	2 cents per $100 property tax increase for open space and farmland preservation	$1,625,000	Pass	53%	47%	
Holland Township	Hunterdon	11/5/2013	Property tax	Up to 4 cents per $100 property tax increase for open space, farmland and recreation		Fail	47%	53%	
Tewksbury Township	Hunterdon	11/4/2008	Property tax	10-year, up to 3 cents annual property tax increase for open space preservation		Fail	44%	56%	Previous passages in 1997 and 1999
Union Township	Hunterdon	11/4/2008	Property tax	2 cents per $100 property tax increase for land preservation and reducing open space debt		Fail	42%	58%	Previous passage in 1998
Denville Township	Morris	11/4/2003	Property tax	Municipal Public Question, 2 cents per $100 property tax increase for open space, recreation, farmland, historic preservation	$8,249,588	Pass	62%	38%	
Hanover Township	Morris	11/2/1999	Property tax	5-year, .02 cent per $100 property tax increase for open space, parks	$1,983,500	Pass	64%	36%	
Harding Township	Morris	11/4/2003	Property tax	Continuation of property tax for open space, historic preservation	$640,000	Pass	69%	31%	
Jefferson Township	Morris	11/5/2002	Property tax	1¢ per $100 property tax increase for open space (non-binding)	$1,560,280	Pass	66%	34%	
Mendham Township	Morris	11/4/2003	Property tax	Continuation of existing property tax for open space, recreation	$2,841,703	Pass	76%	24%	
Montville Township	Morris	11/2/1999	Property tax	Municipal Question 1, 10-year, .02 cent per $100 property tax increase for open space	$2,664,000	Pass	61%	39%	
Pequannock Township	Morris	11/6/2001	Property tax	2 cent property tax increase for land acquisition, recreation, and conservation purposes	$2,200,000	Pass	63%	37%	

Municipality	County	Date of last open space measure	Funding Mecha-nism	Description	Conservation Funds Approved	P/F	%Y	%N	Notes
Randolph Township	Morris	11/2/1999	Property tax	Municipal Question 2, .01 cent per $100 property tax increase for open space, parks	$10,480,000	Pass	77%	23%	
Wharton Borough	Morris	11/4/2003	Property tax	2 cents per $100 property tax increase for open space, recreation	$683,052	Pass	64%	36%	
Morris Township	Morris	11/7/2000	Property tax	Property tax increase to fund for open space preservation	$12,432,380	Pass	61%	39%	
Mine Hill Township	Morris	11/7/2000	Property tax	Half cent property tax levy to establish an Open Space Trust Fund.	$216,120	Pass	74%	26%	
Chester Borough	Morris	11/4/2003	Property tax	2 cents per $100 property tax increase for open space, recreation	$3,769,260	Pass	52%	48%	
Kinnelon Borough	Morris	11/5/2002	Property tax	2¢ per $100 property tax increase for open space, recreation lands, farmland, historic preservation	$1,552,560	Pass	63%	37%	
Boonton Township	Morris	11/2/2004	Property tax	2 cents per $100 property tax increase for open space trust fund		Fail	49%	51%	
Mendham Borough	Morris	11/3/1998	Property tax	$0.02 per $100 Property Tax for Open Space, Conservation, Recreation, Farmland, Historic Preservation	$431,512	Pass	74%	26%	
Morristown	Morris	11/4/2025	Property tax	Establishing a 1 to 5 cent open space tax	$7,976,807	Pass	72%	28%	
Parsippany-Troy Hills Township	Morris	11/8/1988	Property tax	2-cents per $100 property tax increase to establish an Open Space Trust Fund	$31,093,862	Pass	64%	36%	
Riverdale Borough	Morris	11/2/2004	Property tax	7-year, 1 cent per $100 property tax to establish a Recreation and Open Space Trust Fund	$374,185	Pass	52%	48%	
Rockaway Township	Morris	11/6/2007	Property tax	Up to 2 cents per $100 property tax increase for the establishment of an open space trust fund	$11,695,840	Pass	55%	45%	

Municipality	County	Date of last open space measure	Funding Mechanism	Description	Conservation Funds Approved	P/F	%Y	%N	Notes
Roxbury Township	Morris	11/2/1993	Property tax	2 cents per $100 property tax increase for the establishment of an open space trust fund	$8,195,260	Pass	61%	39%	
Clinton Township	Morris County; Fund approved to continue through legislation in 2000	11/7/1995	Property tax	5-year, 2-cents per $100 property tax increase for open space preservation	$981,375	Pass			Expired
Bloomingdale Borough	Passaic	11/7/2000	Property tax	Property tax increase to establish a dedicated fund for land acquisition and recreation	$2,080,000	Pass	54%	46%	
Pompton Lakes Borough	Passaic	11/6/2001	Property tax	1 cent property tax increase for open space and recreation	$1,186,000	Pass	77%	23%	
Ringwood Borough	Passaic	11/6/2001	Property tax	1 cent property tax increase for open space, recreation, conservation, and farmland and historical preservation	$1,635,600	Pass	73%	27%	
Wanaque Borough	Passaic	11/6/2001	Property tax	1 cent property tax increase for open space and recreation	$988,120	Pass	70%	30%	
West Milford Township	Passaic	11/4/2003	Property tax	1 cent per $100 property tax for open space, recreation, farmland, historic preservation	$2,950,000	Pass	50%	50%	
Bernards Township	Somerset	11/7/2000	Property tax	Property tax increase to establish a dedicated fund for land acquisition and recreation	$14,745,900	Pass	56%	44%	Expired 2017
Bedminster Township	Somerset	11/6/2007	Property tax	2 cents per $100 property tax increase for open space trust fund		Fail	33%	67%	
Bernardsville Borough	Somerset	11/3/1998	Property tax	$0.02 per $100 Property Tax for Open Space, Recreation, Conservation, Farmland, Historic Preservation	$5,162,480	Pass	63%	37%	

Municipality	County	Date of last open space measure	Funding Mechanism	Description	Conservation Funds Approved	P/F	%Y	%N	Notes
Peapack-Gladstone Borough	Somerset	11/6/2007	Property tax	1 cent per $100 property tax increase for the preservation of open space and farmland		Fail	49%	51%	
Byram Township	Sussex	11/2/1999	Property tax	Public Question, .02 cents per $100 property tax increase for open space, recreation, farmland, historic preservation	$1,982,500	Pass	73%	27%	
Hamburg Borough	Sussex	11/7/2000	Property tax	Property tax increase to establish dedicated fund for acquisition, development, maintenance, and preservation of open space	$55,100	Pass	73%	27%	
Hopatcong Borough	Sussex	11/2/1999	Property tax	5-year, .01 cent per $100 property tax increase for open space, recreation	$430,000	Pass	51%	49%	
Green Township	Sussex	11/4/1997	Property tax	3 cents per $100 property tax increase to establish a municipal open space, and farmland trust fund	$3,133,800	Pass	70%	30%	
Sparta Township	Sussex	5/9/2000	Property tax	2 cents per $100 property tax increase to establish a “Municipal Open Space, Recreation, and Farmland and Historic Preservation Trust Fund”	$5,070,570	Pass			
Vernon Township	Sussex	11/6/2007	Property tax	5-year, 2 cents per $100 property tax for farmland and open space preservation		Fail	32%	68%	
Allamuchy Township	Warren	11/2/1999	Property tax	Township Question, .02 cent per $100 property tax increase for open space, farmland, historic preservation	$1,212,500	Pass	77%	23%	
Greenwich Township	Warren	11/4/2003	Property tax	1 cent per $100 property tax increase for open space, drinking water, recreation, farmland, historic preservation	$1,027,990.74	Pass	64%	36%	

Municipality	County	Date of last open space measure	Funding Mecha-nism	Description	Conservation Funds Approved	P/F	%Y	%N	Notes
Harmony Township	Warren	11/7/2000	Property tax	0.8 mill property tax increase for open space acquisition and preservation	$1,676,976	Pass	50%	50%	
Lopatcong Township	Warren	11/7/2000	Property tax	Dedicate property tax increase to fund open space ('no' vote would have done away with the existing 0.1 mill levy)	$1,630,040	Pass	64%	36%	
Mansfield Township	Warren	11/5/2002	Property tax	1¢ per $100 property tax increase for open space	$2,477,400	Pass	57%	43%	
Pohatcong Township	Warren	11/2/1999	Property tax	.02 cent per $100 property tax increase for open space, drinking water, recreation, farmland	$2,529,400	Pass	65%	35%	
Alpha Borough	Warren	11/2/2004	Property tax	2 cents per $100 property tax increase for open space	$780,000	Pass	54%	46%	
Franklin Township	Warren	11/2/2004	Property tax	1/2 cent per $100 property tax for open space trust fund	$732,295	Pass	63%	37%	Open space tax ended in April 2025
Frelinghuysen Township	Warren	11/6/2007	Property tax	2 cents per $100 property tax increase for a farmland and open space trust fund		Fail	38%	62%	Passages in 1999 and 2003
Hope Township	Warren	11/2/2004	Property tax	5 cents per $100 property tax to establish Farmland Preservation Trust Fund to acquire and preserve farmland	$1,653,900	Pass	66%	34%	
Liberty Township	Warren	11/3/1998	Property tax	Liberty Question No. 1, $0.02 per $100 Proper-ty Tax for Open Space, Recreation, Farmland, Historic Preservation	$1,020,000	Pass	50%	50%	
Phillipsburg	Warren	11/8/2022	Property tax	5-year, continuation of 2-cent property tax for open space trust fund	$1,244,979	Pass	78%	22%	Expires 2027, TPL
Washington Borough	Warren	11/8/2016	Property tax	5-year, 2 cents per $100 property tax increase for open space and recreation	$371,205	Pass	50%	50%	TPL
Washington Township (Warren)	Warren	11/4/1997	Property tax			Pass	61%	40%	

Municipality	County	Date of last open space measure	Funding Mecha-nism	Description	Conservation Funds Approved	P/F	%Y	%N	Notes
White Township	Warren	11/4/2025	Property tax	0.03 cent tax increase for open space trust fund	$3,328,309	Pass	55%	45%	
Independence Township	Warren	11/3/1998	Property tax	$0.02 per $100 Proper-ty Tax for Open Space, Recreation, Farmland, Historic Preservation	$1,211,420	Pass	52%	48%	

By County

County	Date of last open space measure	Funding Mecha-nism	Description	Conservation Funds Approved	P/F	%Y	%N	Notes
Bergen County	11/6/2007	Property tax	2 cents per $100 property tax increase for open space trust fund	$0	Fail	46%	Fail	
Hunterdon County	11/4/2008	Property tax	3 cents per $100 property tax extension for the preservation of open space, parks, and farmland	$152,000,000	Pass	76%	Pass	
Morris County	11/6/2001	Property tax	County Proposition; 2 cent property tax increase for open space, recreation, and farmland preservation	$67,152,160	Pass	64%	Pass	
Passaic County	11/5/1996	Property tax	2 cents per $100 property tax increase for creation of “Open Space and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund” for open space and farmland preservation	$118,537,000	Pass	51%	Pass	
Somerset County	11/4/1997	Property tax	Increase property by 1.5 cents for the Open Space Preservation Trust Fund	$70,000,000	Pass	61%	Pass	
Sussex County	11/4/2025	Property tax	10-year, half-cent to 1.5 cent property tax renewal for farmland, recreation and open space trust fund	$3,950,000	Pass	81%	Pass	
Warren County	11/5/2002	Property tax	2¢ per $100 property tax increase for open space	$39,060,040	Pass	60%	Pass	

Appendix F.

New Jersey Highlands Acquisition and Funding Plan

Outreach Toolkit

Introduction

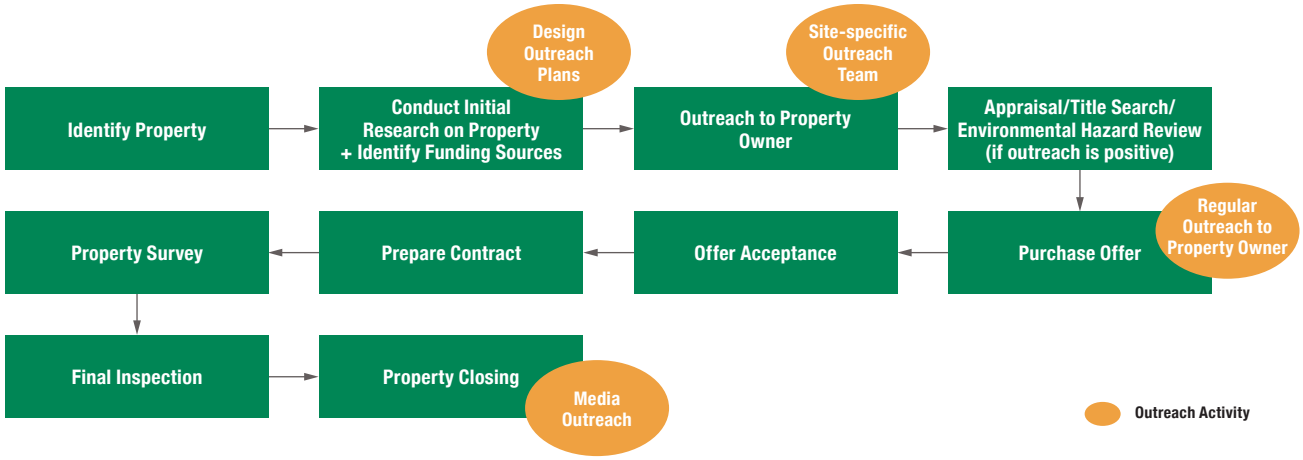
This toolkit is designed to be used to help implement the Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan to guide key partners and practitioners in developing and executing a coordinated outreach approach for land preservation. The toolkit provides guidance on creating an outreach team and developing and implementing an outreach plan when pursuing land acquisitions.

To bolster communications and outreach efforts, the toolkit also provides information on the goals for open space, outdoor recreation, and agriculture and farmland preservation developed through the Open Space and Recreation Plan process. This additional context is meant to assist with developing initial outreach materials and developing the vision statement for the project.

Acquisition Workflow and Associated Outreach Activities

The acquisition workflow and associated outreach activities is depicted below. It should be noted that NJ Department of Environmental Protection's Green Acres Program follows a modified version of this workflow, as referenced in the Resources section of this document.

Acquisition Workflow + Associated Outreach Activities



Identifying and Prioritizing Acquisition Opportunities

In collaboration with stakeholders and Highlands Council staff, the Highlands Council establish goals for future land preservation, taking into account the need for sustained water quality, critical habitats, natural resource protection, recreation, climate resiliency, and agricultural industries. Three categories of land preservation were established — open space conservation, publicly accessible outdoor recreation, and agriculture and farmland preservation — and goals were divided into measurable (to allow for parcel ranking and mapping) and site-specific (for use in site evaluation to determine how suitable a property is for preservation).

These goals were then used to develop a parcel ranking system and spatial database of properties/parcels to assist in prioritizing lands for preservation. This parcel analysis is meant to help communities, land trusts, and other organizations identify the areas to protect that align with key goals for Highlands Region stakeholders. It can also be used to help the same organizations collect information on parcels they have identified on their own for acquisition. For more information on the methodology for developing the goals, parcel ranking system, spatial database, and results see the Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan.

Checklist: What to Know Before Outreach to Property Owner

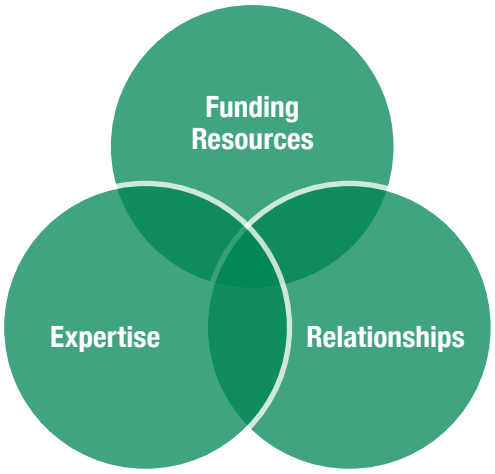
This checklist is meant to identify high level information about the target property that should occur before any outreach to the property owner.

- Identify Owner(s)
- Identify Disposition Entity (e.g., land trust, agency, etc.)
- Develop Mapping and Property Characteristics (See Chapter 4)
- Review measurable and site-specific goals for acquisition type, as outlined in the Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan
- Identify potential funds for acquisition, including the amount of time needed to receive the funding. Be sure to assess how funding sources may influence the property's ultimate disposition.

  TIP: Check out the Funding Sources resource in the Acquisition and Funding Plan

Assemble Outreach Team

Once you have identified your parcel for acquisition, develop a site-specific outreach team that consists of people who have (1) land acquisition or real estate transaction expertise and experience, (2) relationships with the property owner, and (3) funding resources, including grant writing. This will be the core stakeholder group that leads the acquisition activities. Within this team, designate a project manager. Make sure your team members review any solicitation policies their organization might have to guide activities.



Explainer: Relationship Mapping

This is an exercise to identify the key influencers that could be leveraged as an advocate to move your target — in this case the property owner. Identify actual organizations, entities, or individuals, not categories. See example on right of categoriesfor identification. Identify areas where there are questions or gaps for additional research and delegate a member of the outreach team to conduct the research.

Once you have completed the map:

1. Circle the ones that have the most influence over the property owner
2. Star the ones that your outreach team has access to
3. Prioritize the names that have circle and stars.
4. If there are priorities that your outreach team does not have access to, consider inviting someone who does to join the outreach team.



(Adapted from NWF)

Design Outreach Plan

The Outreach Team should develop an Outreach Plan to gain alignment on the overall strategy for the acquisition and future use of the property, guide outreach efforts, and identify funding to lead to a viable project.

Elements of an Outreach Plan include:

- ✓ **Clear vision statement.** The outreach team should come to agreement on intended ownership, management and stewardship needs and roles and responsibilities, and post-acquisition uses. If the future property owner will be different, gain agreement from that entity.
- ✓ **Overall Project Timeline.** Developing an overall acquisition timeline will be helpful to set expectations with stakeholders and should include any timelines on acquiring funding for the project.
- ✓ **Outreach Timeline.** This could include:
  - Initial direct outreach to the property owner or appropriate representative, including type of communication (e.g., letter, phone call, etc.) and who will conduct it.
  - Follow-up on initial outreach (if needed)
  - Timing of routine communications with property owner and/or key decision makers if the property owner responds favorably.
- ✓ **Identification of Stakeholders.** Identify stakeholders beyond the core outreach team that may have an interest in the property, including neighbors, potential user groups, local elected officials, or community-based organizations. This can be based on the prior work conducted to assemble the outreach team, including any property owner relationship mapping conducted. The outreach team should assess when and how often it would be appropriate to inform other stakeholders about any acquisition activities. The goal of this outreach is to gain community support for the acquisition.
- ✓ **Stakeholder and communications database.** Design and populate a stakeholder database that includes organizations and individuals identified in the research phase of the project. Also, include other interested stakeholders that should be kept informed about progress on the acquisition. This database can also be used to track outreach and communications with stakeholders.

The Outreach Plan should incorporate **Best Practices**, such as:

- Use of culturally competent messaging where appropriate.
- Translation of materials, if needed.
- Transparency around acquisition timeline, long-term ownership and public access intentions.

Implement Outreach Plan

- ✓ Set up regular outreach team meetings
- ✓ Develop project management tracker
- ✓ Maintain Stakeholder Database
- ✓ Plan for media outreach when acquisition is completed

Resources for Land Protection

- New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection: The Benefits of Leaving a Legacy...Selling Your Land to Green Acres Fact Sheet
- New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection: Green Acres State Land Acquisition Process Fact Sheet
- Levite, Esq., Robert A., "Working with Landowners on Conservation Issues: Building Bridges of Understanding" and Sample Outreach Documents (Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition).
- Center for Nonprofit Strategies, et. al, *Engaging Landowners in Conservation: A Complete Guide to Designing Programs and Communications*.

SAMPLE OUTREACH LETTER

[DATE]
To: [NAME(S)]
[ADDRESS]
Dear [NAME(S)],

I am writing about your property in [TOWN/COUNTY/STATE], [STREET ADDRESS], in relation to its importance to the New Jersey Highlands Open Space and Recreation Plan.

[Insert a brief, personalized paragraph here explaining why their specific property is important and referencing its unique features, such as a critical wildlife corridor, wetland area, or scenic view].

I'm wondering if I could speak to you about the possibility of working together to explore options for long-term conservation of the land. We are interested in finding FAIR solutions that meet both your family's needs and our conservation goals.

I will follow up with a phone call in the coming weeks, but please feel free to contact me at [PHONE NUMBER] or [EMAIL ADDRESS] at your convenience.

Sincerely,
[YOUR NAME/ORGANIZATION REPRESENTATIVE]



Splitrock Reservoir, Rockaway Township, Morris County (Highlands Council)

Trust for Public Land is a national nonprofit that works to connect everyone to the benefits and joys of the outdoors.

tpl.org



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