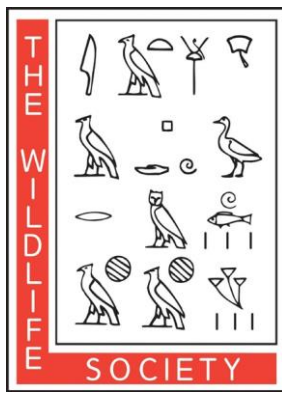


PUBLIC COMMENTS SUBMITTED AT
HIGHLANDS COUNCIL MEETING OCTOBER 19, 2023



**New Jersey Chapter
The Wildlife Society**
<http://wildlife.org/new-jersey/>
newjerseyTWS@gmail.com



October 19, 2023

Attn: New Jersey Highlands Council
100 North Road
Chester, NJ 07930

RE: Support of Active Forest Management

Dear Director Spinelli and Highlands Council Members,

Founded in 1937, The Wildlife Society (TWS) is an international network of over 11,000 leaders in wildlife science, management and conservation who are dedicated to excellence in wildlife stewardship. Our history and mission drive us in our daily work developing and disseminating scientifically rigorous, data-driven strategies to manage our state's wildlife and natural resources.

The Northeast Section and NJ Chapter of TWS are in favor of sustainable forest management that creates a mosaic of forest structures and ages, which ultimately supports biodiversity and other ecosystem services. Throughout the northeastern United States, land use changes, such as natural succession and urban development, have created an underrepresentation of both early- and late-successional forest and a predominance of secondary growth (40-100 year-old) forests. Although there is now more forested land in NJ than there was in 1950, on average, our forests are older than they were 70 years ago, which is concerning given that carbon sequestration rates and biodiversity are both higher in forests under 50 years old. Although early-successional forest was a more prominent forest type in northern NJ prior to European settlement, today less than 3% of the Highlands forests are early-successional.

The reduction and degradation of early-successional forests in the Northeast are major factors associated with the decline of many wildlife populations, including over a third of NJ's Species of Greatest Conservation Need. Factors contributing to these trends include the loss of critical habitat and mesophication, or the shift in the dominant vegetative community due to the suppression of disturbances that open the forest canopy. For thousands of years, northern NJ forests have been dominated by oaks, which are critical for over 90% of Lepidoptera species (moths and butterflies). Mesophication is converting oak forests in the Highlands into northern hardwood forests (maple, beech), significantly altering biotic communities and reducing the availability of water.

Forestry is a regulated activity in NJ, and regulatory exemptions currently exist when conducted in accordance with approved forest stewardship or management plans. Professional, state-approved foresters have the knowledge and skills to manage forests for a variety of ecosystem services, including water availability, wildlife habitat, and even wood products, while keeping forests as forests and protecting water quality and other natural resources.

The Highlands Region is not only important for supplying clean water, but also for supplying habitat for many declining species in NJ that depend on forests, both young and old. Sustainable forest management can help remedy mesophication, disparities in forest stand ages, and biodiversity loss in NJ. Any

impediments to sustainable forest management in the Highlands from new best management practices will increase the average age of forests at the cost of biodiversity, forest resiliency, and water availability on public and private land. Because of this, the NJ Chapter of TWS advocates for:

- 1) The continued use of all sustainable silvicultural practices throughout the entire Highlands Region;
- 2) The continued use of the current forestry and wetlands best management practices that provide scientifically-based, site-specific recommendations; and
- 3) The retention of forestry exemptions in the Highlands Act and Highlands Regional Master Plan without the requirement of Highlands approval.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Brian Kirkpatrick

Past President

The New Jersey Chapter of the Wildlife Society