

SIGNIFICANT NATURAL AREAS

I. INTRODUCTION

Requirements of the Highlands Act

Among the goals of the Highlands Act are to “protect, restore and enhance water quality and quantity of surface and ground waters” and to “protect the natural, scenic, and other resources of the Highlands Region, including but not limited to contiguous forests, wetlands, vegetated stream corridors, steep slopes, and critical habitat for fauna and flora” (Section 10.a.).

Overview of Significant Natural Areas

A Significant Natural Area represents a site or area, typically with unusual or exemplary floristic qualities (such as the presence of rare or endangered plant species) that constitutes an outstanding example of that particular resource type (such as bog, forest or geological feature). These areas include unique or exceptional examples of natural communities that possess significant biodiversity value whose regional significance are in need of protection. Significant Natural Areas typically will include exceptional ability to illustrate the natural or cultural heritage of the Highlands Region and offer excellent opportunities for education or scientific research because it retains a high degree of ecological integrity as a relatively unspoiled example of a natural community type.

II. APPROACH AND INITIAL ACTION

To implement this section of the Highlands Act, the Highlands Council determined to undertake an analysis of Significant Natural Areas and address these lands in the Regional Master Plan (RMP) by taking the following actions:

- identify Significant Natural Areas and create protection areas of these sites include adjoining (buffer) lands which were deemed needed to ensure their continued protection.
- incorporation of these sites into the RMP and include Significant Natural Areas and their protection areas into the Land Use Capability Map.
- establish and maintain an inventory of Significant Natural Areas.
- identify appropriate land use planning and management strategies that can help preserve these sites.
- developed strategies and standards for inclusion in the Policy Guidance Element, Land Use Capability Map and Standards, and Implementation Framework Element of the RMP. (See following section).

III. STRATEGIES & STANDARDS

A. Policy Guidance Element

RMP Standards

The Policy Guidance Element of the RMP will contain standards that will provide protection for **Significant Natural Areas**. The standards will vary depending on which overlay zone they are in. The standards will include the following:

To protect Significant Natural Areas:

- Prohibit land development and alteration within an area determined to be a Significant Natural Area that is incompatible with the resource protection and management requirements.
- Require inclusion of Significant Natural Area Protection Area within municipal zoning and land use ordinances.
- Establish minimum requirements for incorporation of Significant Natural Area component within municipal and County Open Space Plans.

To provide for Smart Design:

- Natural Area Protection and Management Plan to be developed for any site or portion thereof that is a designated Significant Natural Area as a mandatory requirement for any site plan application.
- Establish minimum requirements and guidelines allowing for adjustments and revisions to Natural Area boundaries including provisions for incorporation of Low Impact Development (LID) BMPs.

B. Land Use Capability Map and Standards

Significant Natural Areas are, by definition, high value resources and accordingly will inform the Land Use Capability Map. The Land Use Capability Map will include Significant Natural Areas and their protection areas as part of the Regional Protection Zone.

C. Implementation Framework Element

Pre-Conformance Strategies

- Develop technical guidelines for the identification and delineation of Significant Natural Areas including procedures for nomination and inclusion of additional sites in Municipal Master Plans with the prior review and approval of the Highlands Council.
- Develop technical guidelines and procedures for development of municipal Natural Areas Protection and Management Plans, Open Space Plans and for development and implementation of Low Impact Development Best Management Practices.
- Develop technical review procedures for proposed adjustments and revisions to Significant Natural Area boundary delineations.

Conformance Strategies

- Require that municipal conformance approval include Significant Natural Area inventory, protection standards and approval guidelines in conformance with the RMP.
- Require inclusion of Natural Area Protection Element into Municipal and/or County conformance documents, Master Plans, Zoning and Land Use Ordinances, as appropriate.
- Require inclusion of Significant Natural Areas into Municipal and County Open Space Plans.

Five Year Highlands Resource Protection and Planning Goals

- Maintain an inventory of Significant Natural Areas within the Highlands region and develop appropriate management and stewardship strategies.

Coordination and Consistency:

- Develop a coordinated regulatory review program with the NJDEP to ensure consistency of permit actions, open space acquisition priorities and public lands management strategies consistent with the resource protection goals of the RMP.

Local Participation:

- Develop educational program for municipal and county officials on methods to identify and protect Significant Natural Areas.

IV. DISCUSSION