

Highlands Council Monthly Report

November 2023

Released December 14, 2023



Abram S. Hewitt State Forest, West Milford, Passaic County.

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | November 1-30, 2023

Executive Director Priority Spotlight

- **Ensuring the long-term health of Highlands forests.** As mentioned in this report on previous occasions, Highlands Council staff began a process several months ago to develop best management practice (BMP) guidance specifically for Highlands forests. The need for such guidance is clear: Although statewide Forestry and Wetlands BMPs exist, they were created in 1995, prior to legislative recognition of the important value of the Highlands region to the state's water supply, prior to understanding the impacts of climate change on the region's forests, and prior to the development of forestry BMPs specifically intended to balance forest management with protection of water supply areas. All accepted science recognizes the direct relationship between healthy forests and forest soils and the protection of water quality, water quantity and water timing; the Highlands region's role in providing all or a part of the drinking water supply for 70% of the state's nine million residents call for the incorporation of special provisions for Highlands forests.

Since 1995, in addition to the passage of the Highlands Act, the U.S. Forest Service, the EPA, the USDA, the NRCS and states both neighboring New Jersey and across the country have put forth BMPs and other guidance intended to mitigate and reduce impacts of forest management practices on water resources and to foster improvements in forest health. This has not yet happened in New Jersey. The intent of the Highlands Council effort was to address this gap by providing a supplement to the 1995 statewide BMPs using updated information and expert input from a wide range of stakeholders to inform and guide the process by which the State Forester approves forest management and forest stewardship plans.

Sustainable active forestry practices, such as those implemented by the New York City DEP for the 2,000 square mile Catskill and Croton watersheds, are imperative for ensuring the long-term health of the Highlands' important forested lands. Our work on this issue and our research and outreach efforts support this goal and, while still early in the drafting process, the Highlands Council was engaged in creating a comprehensive document that reflected these facts. Regardless of our efforts at the Highlands Council, our work would require the cooperation and acceptance by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP), which has been actively engaged in our process through its many agencies since the outset.

In early December Highlands Council staff met with the NJDEP and agreed to transfer our work on this endeavor to our sister agency for consideration when and if they embark upon an update to the existing 1995 statewide Best Management Practices. We look forward to this continued collaboration and remain committed to the long-term protection of Highlands forests.

- **Failing Septics in the Highlands.** The Highlands Council is collaborating with the NJDEP's wastewater program to find a solution for the geographically and resource-constrained small communities in the Highlands that are beset with outdated failing septic systems and cesspools. These older on-site wastewater facilities are negatively impacting the region's waterways, as many of these communities are located on rivers such as the South Branch of the Raritan and Musconetcong Rivers. Existing regulations that were not designed to respond to problems like this and economic limitations make solutions difficult to find and the environmental and human impacts make finding solutions imperative. The Highlands Council is committed to working with our partners at the NJDEP to find workable and implementable answers for these communities.
- **Get out and enjoy the Highlands.** The end of the calendar year brings wistful reflections on goals achieved and opportunities yet to be captured. But forget all that for now. Go visit a Highlands park. Take in the vistas from Wyanokie High Point in Norvin Green State Forest or if you're not feeling that ambitious, take a walk or a bike ride on the Columbia Trail that spans Morris and Hunterdon counties. If outdoor adventure isn't on your agenda, hit one of the great small towns of the Highlands. Spend a little time strolling the streets of downtown Chester or Clinton and popping into shops. Enjoy treats from Hacklebarney Cider Mill in Chester Township or Mackey's Orchard in White Township (They're still open on weekends!). Friends, family and fun are the focus at this time of year, and the Highlands is a great place to enjoy all of it.

Municipal and County Regional Master Plan (RMP) Implementation

Updates related to Highlands Council-funded projects that help implement the RMP.

- **Byram Township, Sussex County.** Byram recently submitted all materials related to completion of the township's Wastewater Management Plan. Highlands Council staff reviewed the deliverables, found them to be consistent with the approved Scope of Work (SOW) and eligible for reimbursement.
- **Chester Borough, Morris County.** The Borough submitted a final draft of its Open Space and Recreation Plan. Highlands Council staff reviewed the materials and approved them for reimbursement.
- **Chester Township, Morris County.** The Chester Township Zoning Officer completed training and became certified to issue determinations regarding the most common Highlands Act exemptions. The [Municipal Exemption Certification Program](#) is the result of an agreement between the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection and the Highlands Council to provide training to municipal officials regarding seven of the 14 Highlands Act exemptions.
- **Hope Township, Warren County.** The Township submitted a completed Warehouse Zoning Analysis, which was reviewed by staff and found to be in alignment with the approved SOW and eligible for reimbursement.
- **Hunterdon County.** Highlands Council staff have approved a SOW submitted by Hunterdon County for the development of the 2024 Explore Hunterdon Tourism Digital Marketing and Advertising Campaign.

- **Mount Arlington Borough, Morris County.**
 - Mount Arlington submitted a SOW to complete an Initial Assessment Report (IAR) to consider bringing the Planning Area portion of the municipality into alignment with the Highlands RMP. Highlands Council staff reviewed and approved the SOW so the project can proceed.
 - The Borough submitted deliverables related to a Beach Restoration Plan. Highlands Council staff reviewed the materials and found them to be in alignment with the approved SOW and eligible for reimbursement.
- **Borough of Mountain Lakes, Morris County.** The Borough passed a resolution indicating its intent to review and revise its master plan and development regulations to align with the Highlands RMP.
- **Oxford Township, Warren County.**
 - The Township submitted a SOW for planning activities related to the Northwest Food Processing & Innovation Center. Highlands Council staff reviewed and approved the SOW, authorizing project work to proceed.
 - The Highlands Council provided a letter of support for the Township's USDA Meat and Poultry Processing Expansion Program (MPPEP) grant application. Funding through the MPPEP program will complement planning grants from the Highlands Council by providing funding for implementation expenses to develop the Northwest Food Processing and Innovation Center.
- **Randolph Township, Morris County.** The Township submitted an Environmental Guidebook which is a component of the Township's Sustainable Economic Development plan. Staff reviewed the deliverable and found it consistent with the approved SOW and eligible for reimbursement.
- **West Milford, Passaic County.** The township submitted materials related to the development of its Watershed Management study. The deliverables were reviewed by staff and found consistent with the approved SOW and eligible for reimbursement.
- **Liberty Township, Warren County.** The township submitted a SOW to complete components of its stormwater management plan related to the MS4 permitting process. Highlands Council staff are currently reviewing the SOW.
- **Mendham Township, Morris County.** The township submitted a SOW to complete components of its stormwater management plan related to the MS4 permitting process. Highlands Council staff are currently reviewing the SOW.
- **Bedminster Township, Somerset County.** The township submitted a SOW to complete components of its stormwater management plan related to the MS4 permitting process. Highlands Council staff are currently reviewing the SOW.

Project Reviews

The Highlands Council does not issue permits but is statutorily required to review certain proposed projects in the region for consistency with the Highlands RMP. In some cases, the Highlands Council shares jurisdiction with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP).

- **Planning Area Consistency Review: Warehouse Development, 2 Hilton Court, Parsippany-Troy Hills, Morris County.** Applicant submitted revised site plans and details regarding changes made to this proposed project to meet the conditions of a consistency review originally completed by Highlands Council staff in 2021.

Highlands Council staff review is in progress.

Land Preservation Program Updates

- **Land Preservation Project in Morris County.** The Highlands Council received an application to its open space partnership funding program proposing the preservation of 37 acres in Morris County. The property is largely forested and contains a tributary of the Musconetcong River. The Highlands Council submitted an application to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's Highlands Conservation Act grant program to secure a portion of the funding to complete this preservation project, with an estimated value of more than \$400,000.
- **HDC Site Inspections.** Highlands staff began conducting HDC (Highlands Development Credit) site inspections in November. Two properties were found to have potential issues, staff are working with the property owners to bring them into compliance with the terms of the easements.

Staffing and Staff Development

- **Planning/GIS Intern.** In November, the Highlands Council welcomed Ramapo College Senior Karolyn Garcia to the team. Karolyn will be working with the Highlands Council 1-2 days per week through February 2024, providing support to both the planning and GIS teams. She is majoring in Environmental Studies with an Environmental Science minor and contributed to a research project at Ramapo on microplastics in clams.

Outreach & Education

- **Brownfield Development Area (BDA) Program Workshop.** The Highlands Council partnered with the Office of Brownfield and Community Revitalization to host a workshop on the recently relaunched [Brownfield Development Area \(BDA\) program](#). Designation as a BDA opens access to technical assistance, enhanced support from the NJDEP, and the potential for millions in grant funding for site remediation and redevelopment.
- **United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Highlands Conservation Act (HCA) Summit.** Highlands Council staff members attended and presented at an event hosted by USFWS to mark the reauthorization earlier this year of the HCA. [The HCA provides grant funding](#) to the four-state federal Highlands region to support land preservation efforts in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut. Since 2007, New Jersey has been awarded more than \$17 million through this program.
- **Annual New Jersey League of Municipalities (NJLOM) Conference.** Highlands Council staff members met with representatives from a number of constituent municipalities and counties, as well as contract professionals and sister agencies during the three-day NJLOM Conference in Atlantic City.

- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 18 inquiries from constituents in November.

Municipal & County Coordination

Highlands Council staff frequently meet with our constituent municipalities and counties to discuss their priorities and how they intersect with implementation of the Highlands RMP.

- In November, the Highlands Council met with Union Township, Hunterdon County (grant funding and warehousing); Mountain Lakes Borough, Morris County (RMP implementation); Sparta Township, Sussex County (Highlands planning grants); Chester Borough, Morris County (Water Use and Conservation Management Plan [WUCMP]); Lopatcong and Pohatcong Townships, Warren County (redevelopment).

Agency & Organization Collaboration

Highlands Council staff often meet with sister state agencies to ensure effective coordination; professional and nongovernmental organizations to learn and collaborate; and other entities that have a stake in protecting the New Jersey Highlands. Below are highlights of these meetings.

- In November, the Highlands Council met with representatives from the Office of Brownfield and Community Revitalization (BDA workshop planning); representatives from the Governor's Authorities Unit and the Fair Share Housing Center; and representatives from several nonprofit organizations to discuss the West Milford Compressor station.
- The Highlands Council Science Manager toured a Stormwater Basin Retrofit Project in Franklin Township, Warren County with representatives from the New Jersey Water Supply Authority and the Lower Raritan Watershed Partnership.
- Highlands Council staff attended the New Jersey Conservation Blueprint Steering Committee meeting at Duke Farms.

Council Committee Meetings

- The RMP Amendment Committee met in November.

Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The December Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, December 14, 2023. The January public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, January 18. All meetings are held at 4 p.m. at the Highlands Council office in Chester, NJ. Complete details are available on the [calendar page](#) of the Highlands Council website.

