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Highlands Council Releases Report Detailing Continuing Effort to Preserve Highlands Region

CHESTER, N.J. – The New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council today released a report detailing the tremendous progress that has been made in preserving the critical resources of the Highlands Region.

The report, made available to the public at today's meeting, also can be downloaded from the Highlands Council website at:

http://www.highlands.state.nj.us/njhighlands/news/publ/land_pres_report_081910.pdf

“This report details the ongoing, considerable efforts made by the State of New Jersey to protect one of its most precious resources – clean drinking water,” Highlands Council Acting Chairman Jack Schrier said. “There is still much work to be done, but this is the first chapter of a success story.”

According to the report, 290,214 acres of open space and farmland in the Highlands Region are preserved, representing over one third of the entire Highlands Region. It also represents approximately 46 percent of the undeveloped land in the Highlands Region. A total of 7,690 acres have been preserved since the adoption of the Regional Master Plan in July 2008; of those, 5,694 acres were identified for priority acquisition in the RMP.

Significantly, 194,344 acres – nearly 47 percent of the Preservation Area – is now preserved in perpetuity and off limits to future development. This includes lands preserved through purchase by State, federal, county or municipal government or by non-profit agencies, as well as the purchase of development rights through farm preservation or Transfer of Development Rights programs.

Using the average per acre costs for preserved open space and preserved farmland established in the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP), today it would cost an estimated \$2.2 billion to preserve the 290,214 acres; using the more recent average per acre costs based upon land acquisitions since adoption of the RMP, it would cost \$3.38 billion.

“The Highlands Region contains some of the last undisturbed wilderness in the most densely populated state in the nation,” Executive Director Eileen Swan said. “Preserving this beautiful region is a necessity not only for its drinking water, farmland and forests, but also as a legacy for our children and grandchildren. Protecting this source of water also is critical for the economy of the State as many businesses rely on the water from the Highlands region.”

The report also highlights the implementation of the Highlands Council’s regional Transfer of Development Rights program and compares the average per acre values arising from participation in that program with the two other primary preservation options: the State Farmland Preservation Program and the State Green Acres Program. While the per acre values to be realized by individual property owners vary due to the pre-Highlands Act development potential of their parcels, on average, the per acre values for properties participating in the TDR program (\$8,967) are similar to those being offered through the farmland preservation (\$9,816) and Green Acres (\$10,265). These per acre values are representative of what has been paid in the Highlands Region since the passage of the Act.

Lastly, the report indicates that the State should continue to build on its historic investment in the Highlands Region to ensure protection of the Region’s critical water supply and important agricultural resources. With the passage of the Green Acres, Water Supply and Floodplain Protection, and Farmland and Historic Preservation Bond Act of 2009, monies are available for continued open space and farmland acquisitions. Assisting this process will be the extension of the dual appraisal methodology authorized by the Highlands Act, which extension bill unanimously passed the Legislature earlier this summer and is pending the Governor’s review.