



**NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS COALITION**

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**Press Release**

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***Enviro's to Highlands Council: Protect Our Water***

***Protection of water and other resources of NJ Highlands and sustainable agriculture are harmonious goals of a strong regional master plan***

**Asbury, NJ:** Today, the New Jersey Highlands Coalition joined Academy Award winning stage and screen actress and Highlands resident Celeste Holm and leading environmental groups at **Comeback Farm**, a preserved organic farm in Hunterdon County, to press the NJ Highlands Council to adopt a strong Regional Master Plan (RMP) that protects the resources of the NJ Highlands and provides sufficient funding and programs for sustainable agriculture. In addition, citizens will be urged to comment at the final of three Highlands Council public hearings, on February 13<sup>th</sup> at 6:30PM at Voorhees High School, 256 County Rt. 513, Glen Gardner, NJ.

"The water and other resources of the New Jersey Highlands must be vigorously protected," **stated Academy Award winning actress and Highlands resident since 1922, Celeste Holm**, "or New Jersey, from the Hudson River to the Delaware River will become an uninterrupted series of malls, apartments, McMansions, parking lots and roadways."

The current Final Draft RMP, out for public comment until February 28<sup>th</sup>, stresses important goals, policies, objectives and programs, with little guidance provided how to implement them. A comprehensive plan for sustainable agriculture is yet to be incorporated in the Plan.

"Today, we're meeting in the heart of some of the best farmland in the Highlands. Mark Canright has preserved this farm and is returning it to an organic state. He has big plans, works extraordinarily hard and serves as a great model for sustainable farming in the Highlands. I salute him," **said Julia Somers, Executive Director of the NJ Highlands Coalition.**

"However, much of this watershed, the Musconetcong watershed, is in a water deficit according to the Highlands Council's own data. If clustered housing were permitted throughout the watershed, it would further worsen a serious Highlands water supply shortage that already exists. The Highlands Council would be irresponsible to permit this to happen, yet that is exactly what the Regional Master Plan proposes. Without mitigation being in place in deficit watersheds, and proven to be effective, new development must not be permitted."

"The economic well being of the entire state of New Jersey is affected by adequate water supply. Recent drought events in Georgia point to our need to take care of this precious resource," said **Mark Canright** of Comeback Farm. "A strong Highlands Regional Master Plan can help us in New Jersey do just that."

The New Jersey Highlands Coalition is urging members of the public to attend the final of three public hearings being held by the Highlands Council on February 13<sup>th</sup> at Voorhees High School in Glen Gardner at 6:30 PM. The Coalition urges members of the public to echo New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's Commissioner Lisa Jackson's comments to the Senate Environment Committee on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008, in reference to the Highlands Council's Final Draft RMP: "I believe we are on a path to make the plan stronger, but I can't say that definitely. Our goal is to come up with a set of revisions we can agree on with the council."

"The need to preserve the NJ Highlands to meet our water supply needs was acknowledged by NJ Governor Stokes in 1906," said **Bedminster Mayor Bob Holtaway**, "my calendar says 2008, so it's about time to get this job done."

**Bill Kibler, Executive Director of the South Branch Watershed Association** noted, "I emphasize the statutory obligation to *restore* and *enhance* our surface and groundwaters. Ultimately, *that* legislative mandate is the yardstick by which the Council's efforts will be measured. It is not enough to simply minimize future harm or preserve the status quo in the Highlands."

Some specific concerns of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition in the Highlands Council's Final Draft RMP are: the continued development permitted in watersheds that are already in a water deficit; the possibility of extending sewers into the Preservation Area; the need to require a clear hierarchy of preventing damage to natural resources first and foremost, requiring applicants to move through avoidance, minimization and mitigation; the need for clearer and more protective standards for map adjustments; and the lack of supporting documents and standards necessary to make the programs, including sustainable farming, possible.

"We ask the Council to stop bartering with our drinking water supplies! Development projects are being permitted in areas already experiencing a water deficit with only a promise that mitigation measures will restore the loss sometime in the future," said **Cindy Ehrenclou, Executive Director of The Upper Raritan River Watershed Association**.

In a recent study by Rutgers University, 3,000 acres of land in the Highlands is lost per year to development, 1,700 of those lost acres are farmland.

"Allowing development in farmland areas of this region will devastate the viability of the local agricultural economy as well as the important rural and environmental qualities that define the Highlands," noted **Alison Mitchell, Director of Policy, New Jersey Conservation Foundation**.

The New Jersey Highlands Coalition is made up of a diverse and effective group of organizations and individuals — small and large, local, regional, statewide and national — all working together to protect, enhance and restore the New Jersey Highlands.

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