



NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS COALITION

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Press Release

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Weakened Highlands Plan Threatens Water Supply *More Development in Drinking Water Deficit Areas; Paving Prime Ground Water Recharge Areas; and Urban Density Development on Farmland All Allowed Under Highlands Plan*

Glen Gardner, NJ: Overlooking Round Valley Reservoir to the South, leaders of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition gathered at an overlook in Voorhees State Park and expressed serious concern over the future of the drinking water supplies that serve 5.4 million residents of New Jersey. The Highlands Act promised that drinking water was to be protected by the long anticipated Regional Master Plan (RMP). The proposed and weakened plan, currently being debated by the Highlands Council, may be adopted as early as July 17th.

“As we stand overlooking one of New Jersey’s largest reservoir systems, holding 55 billion gallons of clean drinking water for our state’s residents and businesses, it is abundantly clear why the continued weakening of the Highlands Regional Master Plan threatens the safety of our drinking water and the strength of our economy,” **stated Julia Somers, Executive Director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.** “The Highlands Council must address major flaws in the plan before adoption, as early as July 17th, in order to properly fulfill the mandates of Highlands Act. They must act now to ensure that the environmental, cultural and agricultural resources of the Region are protected and that clean and plentiful drinking water can continue to serve over 5.4 million New Jersey residents.”

Despite the objections of the public, science professionals and environmental organizations, the Highlands Council continues to propose new, scientifically indefensible policies in a weakened plan, including:

- to permit increased water use and consumption in water deficit sub-watersheds, despite economic and public health concerns because of more frequently occurring droughts;
- to pave 15% to 45% of lands scientifically recognized as prime ground water recharge areas in all zones throughout the Highlands, including areas where it is currently prohibited;
- to encourage residential developments at urban densities in New Jersey’s best agricultural areas; and
- to allow counties to adopt weakened ground water nitrate standards, well below the scientific thresholds that the Highlands Council itself has determined will degrade existing water quality.

Bill Kibler, Executive Director of the South Branch Water Association, explained, “Suggesting that we can develop our way out of water deficits sounds like business as usual in New Jersey. For years our leaders in Trenton tried to buy our way out of financial deficits by spending more and borrowing against our future, resulting in the current budget crisis. Now, the suggestion is to build our way out of water deficits by allowing more development and gambling with our children’s water supply. Dollars or water, a bad idea is a bad idea.”

“The Highlands Council, with these proposals, is undermining the fundamental protections of the Highlands and is threatening the water supply of over 5 million people” **stated Jeff Tittel Director NJ Sierra Club.** “Instead of making the Plan stronger and following sound science, these proposals will be adding more sprawl, more development and more pollution to the Highlands and its waterways.”

Voorhees State Park encompasses 1,400 acres of permanently preserved lands with full camping facilities. The camp was built during the 1930’s by the Depression-era federal agency known as the Civilian Conservation Corps created by Franklin Delano Roosevelt to create jobs and re-invigorate the economy. Nearly 200 men began work on the nearly pristine tract of land later to become Voorhees State Park, building cabins, hiking trails, roads, and other facilities. For many CCC enrollees at Voorhees, the job provided vocation and avocational classes. The education program was

known as “The School of the Woods” and included job training, current events and access to a camp library. The facilities built then remain in excellent condition and continue to serve the public to this day.

Voorhees State Park and the New Jersey Astronomical Association’s Observatory serve as a prime example of why the Highlands Region must be protected from increasing environmental degradation. Eco-tourism currently provides \$3.9 billion a year to New Jersey’s economy. By preserving the integrity of the Region, the Highlands can continue to provide plentiful clean drinking water to residents throughout the state, while continuing to drive economic revenue through the sale of eco-tourism related products like fishing and hunting equipment, gasoline, food, and other local goods.

The Council is proposing weakening the Highlands Plan and threatening drinking water by:

- **Allowing More Development in Water Deficit Areas** – Of the 183 sub-watersheds in the Highlands Region, over 110 have been scientifically shown to be incapable of sustainably supplying drinking water over the long term to support continuing development. Known as deficit sub-watersheds, *the Highlands Council is proposing to allow development to continue in these deficit areas, even those determined to be in a critical deficit*, with the condition that a developer implements a mitigation project to return up to 200% of the water used back to the ground and aquifer. Of the drinking water deficits, some are small and could be mitigated with established procedures, while others have substantial deficits. Mitigation, to address deficits of these magnitudes is unprecedented in New Jersey. The New Jersey Highlands Coalition is concerned about potentially devastating impacts on the quantity and quality of groundwater if untested mitigation projects were to fail or were not properly monitored and maintained over the long term, resulting in more pollution and more flooding. Coupled with the current pattern of more persistent and critical droughts, the potential threat to the public demands policies that safeguard the public’s safety over those that favor development interests.
- **Development in Prime Ground Water Recharge Areas** – Impervious surfaces (pavement, roofs, compacted soils, etc.) directly impact water quality and quantity, increasing the levels of pollutants in water, creating rapid runoff resulting in flooding, and preventing the infiltration of rainwater to replenish the groundwater aquifers that supply wells. In earlier drafts of the RMP, the Council prohibited all development in the environmentally sensitive zone of the Prime Ground Water Recharge Areas in the Highlands. Instead of maintaining this strict standard necessary to protect ground water quality and quantity, *the Council has weakened the plan by proposing to allow up to 45% percent of Prime Ground Water Recharge Areas to be paved over - their extraordinary resource values destroyed forever.* Counter to the mandates of the Act, this policy will degrade well-water quality and quantity for Highlands residents, most particularly within the Existing Community Zone
- **Urban Density, Residential Development on Farmland** – Known as clustering, the Highlands Council will be encouraging residential developments at urban density levels in the Highlands’ best agricultural areas. Despite overwhelming objections from the public, *the Council’s clustering provisions will permit residential development on the Highlands most productive agricultural soils, permanently reducing agricultural yields in the Highlands and a lifestyle and landscape the Act mandates that the Council protect.* The Council must maintain agricultural viability by transferring development rights into more appropriate areas and not permit more development and fragmentation of our best farmlands.
- **Allowing Counties to Weaken the Council’s Science-based and Health Protective Septic Effluent Nitrate Limits** –*The Council has proposed that Planning Area towns that have not opted into the Regional Plan retain the option to adopt weaker nitrate standards than those developed by the Highlands Council for the region, rather than relying on the Councils up-to-date scientific data.* Use of a weaker 2 mg/liter standard, which is less protective of public health, will directly impact drinking water quality and degradation from the Council’s own science-based standards. Further, the lower standard would permit greater density of water-consuming development to take place, some of which are already in water supply deficit. Not only would the Council be tossing aside its own protective Highlands-wide “blind-to-the-line” planning for Preservation and Planning Areas that utilized the most current science-based data, it will result in an unintended, Plan-defeating disincentive for Planning Areas communities to conform.

The NJ 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 NJ Highlands