



## 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*

**Rockaway Township:** Today, leaders of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition stood on the shore of the majestic Splitrock Reservoir 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 17<sup>th</sup>.

“Splitrock Reservoir is only one piece of the large, complex system of Highlands lakes and rivers that serve over 5.4 million New Jersey residents with clean and plentiful drinking water,” **stated Julia Somers, Executive Director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.** “Without a strong, science-based Regional Master Plan, the natural and cultural integrity of the Highlands Region will succumb to encroaching sprawl development and increased habitat fragmentation, directly impacting the quality and quantity of the waterways which serve as the sources for our drinking water.”

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.

Splitrock Reservoir is surrounded by over 1,500 acres of preserved land acquired as both watershed lands through the NJDEP and with the assistance of non-profit organizations like the Trust for Public Land. The reservoir has a capacity of 3.3 billion gallons of water. The lands surrounding the reservoir have been open to the public since 2003 and now serve a growing cohort of anglers, paddlers, hikers, wildlife watchers, mountain bikers, boy scouts and girl scouts, hunters, and picnickers. White-tailed deer, black bear and wild turkey are all prevalent in the area, as well as raptors, waterfowl and neotropical birds during the spring and fall migrations. Bald eagle sightings are also very common around the lake.

**Marion Harris, chairman of the Morris County Trust for Historic Preservation, explained the cultural significance of Splitrock Reservoir and the unprotected historic resources throughout the Highlands.** “Historic resources in the Highlands have always suffered because nobody recognizes that the region is rich with such resources. More and more, our historic, cultural and archeological sites are suffering from development pressure, especially in the Highlands Region. A strong plan based on the Highlands Act’s mandate to protect historic and cultural resources could prevent these losses but currently the plan lacks the mechanisms to permanently protect our link to the past.”

The Splitrock reservoir serves 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 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.”

*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*

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