



NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS COALITION

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Press Release

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Governor Corzine Addresses Some Major Concerns with Highlands Plan through Executive Order

New Jersey Highlands Coalition Commends Governor for his Intervention but Will Continue to Work for Progress in New and Balanced Highlands Council Appointments, Long-Term Open Space Funding and Future Amendments to the Highlands Plan

Trenton, NJ: Today, leaders of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition gave qualified support for parts of Governor Corzine's Executive Order, which addresses some of the major deficiencies in the Highlands Regional Master Plan and its implementation. The Coalition sees this as an important first step in an effort to address concerns of the environmental community regarding the Plan and other statewide issues such as long-term open space funding. Through the Executive Order signed today, September 5th, Governor Corzine demonstrated that the concerns of the environmental community with the RMP and its implementation are substantive. The Coalition hopes that his administration is committed to ensuring that the strong resource protections mandated by the 2004 Highlands Act will be implemented by the Highlands Council and the NJDEP in the future.

"We're pleased that the Governor has recognized the importance of strengthening the Regional Master Plan," said **Julia Somers, Executive Director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition**. "We are cautiously optimistic that Governor Corzine knows this is just a first step of several he must take if the RMP is to live up to the promise of the Highlands Act."

Governor Corzine had until today, September 5th to veto the Highlands Council minutes adopting the Highlands Plan. This would have effectively sent the Council back to the drawing board to strengthen areas of the plan that threaten public health and safety and allow for the degradation of water and natural resources throughout the Region. In an effort to speed implementation of the Plan and correct some of its environmentally degrading policies, Governor Corzine's Executive Order provides significant direction to the DEP on how the Highlands Plan is to be implemented. The Highlands RMP itself can only be changed by the Highlands Council.

The New Jersey Highlands Coalition and leaders of the environmental community view the Governor's action as the first step in a series of actions needed to fully implement the strongest Highlands resource protections possible, including:

- New and reasonable appointments to the Highlands Council to achieve a fair balance between public members with environmental planning expertise and elected officials, as mandated by the Highlands Act;
- re-authorization of the Garden State Preservation Trust through a long-term dedicated funding source to assist in land acquisition and landowner compensation in the Region, as necessary to achieve the resource protection objectives of the Highlands RMP;

- significant direction to state agencies, including the NJDEP and the Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) regarding how inter-agency cooperation will be conducted, with clear directive that the Highlands RMP resource limitations takes precedence over earlier projected COAH obligations;
- a resource-based COAH policy in the Highlands to balance the need for affordable housing with resource limitations, which prohibits inclusionary development and sets a percentage of available water and sewer capacity aside for affordable units only.
- future strengthening amendments to the Highlands RMP to address concerns over increased groundwater pollution currently permitted under by the Highlands Plan, especially regarding the permitted 10 mg/L nitrate pollutant loading allowed under the Highlands RMP for clustered development, a level significantly higher than DEP's statewide limit of 2 mg/L
- and clear guidance to landowners and municipalities that clustering is not an appropriate regional conservation tool to protect farmland and groundwater quality and will only be applicable once land acquisition funds and the TDR program are fully exhausted for conservation purposes.

Eric Stiles, Vice President of Conservation & Stewardship of the New Jersey Audubon Society said, "We are calling on the Governor to make strong appointments to the Council. 8 of the 14 current Council members have terms that will expire before the end of 2008. He has a unique opportunity to serve history by making appointments of Council members who will be strong advocates for protecting the region's critical water and wildlife."

On the subject of renewal of the Garden State Preservation Trust, **David Epstein, President of the Morris Land Conservancy**, stated, "We applaud the Governor for supporting renewal of the Garden State Preservation Trust, which will be out of funds by year end. We look forward to working with the Governor to find a new funding source to restore the legacy of this vital program that is the catalyst for preserving lands in the Highlands and throughout New Jersey."

The Coalition's position on use of clustering in the Highlands has been consistent. **Michele Byers, Director of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation explained**, "Allowing clustering on every parcel, without planning in context of regional planning, is just another form of sprawl. We are glad that the Governor has recognized this."

Voicing continued concern about how COAH and the Highlands RMP will become coherent, sound state policy, **Julia Somers** added, "We hope the Governor's directive to COAH will ensure the Highlands' mandated protection of essential water supply and other critical natural resources, as well as protection of the character of the Highlands and its cultural and scenic resources."

"We are glad that the Governor agrees with us that the RMP is flawed and does not adequately protect the water resources in the Highlands," stated **Jeff Tittel, Director of the NJ Chapter of the Sierra Club**, "We hope that this the beginning of a process to further fix the plan and get stable funding for open space."

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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