

# Mount Olive Chronicle

## Last minute rescue for Highlands funding

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Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen, R-11, dodged the Congressional sledgehammer on Tuesday and tentatively won \$4 million for land preservation efforts in New Jersey.

Frelinghuysen is a member of the House Appropriations Committee which voted to provide the funds for the Highlands Conservation Act. Frelinghuysen authored the act in 2004.

A House subcommittee meanwhile voted to cut 80 percent of the funding for the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund. The fund is the source of money for the Highlands Conservation Act.

“I welcome the Appropriations Committee’s approval of \$4 million for the Highlands Conservation Act this year but remain disappointed with the overall reductions in funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund included in the fiscal year 2012 Interior Appropriations bill,” Frelinghuysen said in a statement. “I will be working to increase and maximize available dollars as the appropriations process continues this year.”

The full House is expected to consider the funding proposals next week while they must still be approved by the Senate and signed by President Obama.

The \$4 million in funds for the Highlands Conservation Act was approved in the morning by the House Appropriations Committee in a bipartisan “manager’s amendment.”

It was offered by the chairman of the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho. Simpson’s subcommittee earlier voted the 80 percent cut in funds for the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

It was not clear if the Highlands funding would come from the remaining Land and Water Conservation Fund or from some other source.

**Julia Somers, director of the N.J. Highlands Coalition, applauded the funding for New Jersey but said cuts in the conservation fund would significantly hurt preservation efforts around the country.**

**“While we welcome the fact that funding is provided for the Highlands Conservation Act, if they are not increasing the Land and Water Conservation Fund then the funds will be taken from other projects,” Somers said. “The cuts to the Land and Water Conservation Fund are so extraordinary.”**

Kathy Westra, director of the Land and Water Conservation Coalition, also said that even with the funding for New Jersey, that preservation efforts remain “very, very much in trouble.”

The Highlands Conservation Act originally authorized \$10 million a year for 10 years to assist states with land conservation partnership projects, and \$1 million annually for the U.S. Forest Service to

provide continued technical assistance and research in the four-state Highlands Region.

The act was never anywhere near fully-funded with the highest annual funding of about \$2.5 million.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund was enacted in 1965 and has provided about \$38 million in past years for New Jersey projects, including the Great Swamp National Wildlife Preserve. The fund is supported by a tax on offshore oil and gas leases and uses no taxpayers' money.

“The Land and Water Conservation Fund program that has preserved so many of America’s and New Jersey’s most precious places is under threat as never before,” said a statement from the N.J. Highlands Coalition, the Land and Water Conservation Fund Coalition The Trust for Public Land.

**Somers said the recommendation to chop funding for the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund will have far reaching effects on conservation efforts in New Jersey and around the nation.**

**“If ever there was a time to preserve land, this is it because of the low cost of property,” Somers said. “This is a deliberate policy-to gut something the Republicans don’t like \_ saving land.”**

### **Funding Leverage**

Land and Water Conservation Fund money is typically leveraged with local and state money to buy and preserve land, according to Westra of the Land and Water Conservation Coalition.

“It has allowed diverse groups to partner to preserve land that otherwise might be lost to developers,” Westra said.

By law, Congress can use up to \$900 million of the tax from offshore oil and gas leases each year for the purpose of conservation.

The Obama administration had requested that the entire \$900 million be allocated for the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

But the subcommittee wants to provide just \$62 million for the fund, an 80 percent cut from last year’s authorization.

“The subcommittee recommended that programs stay alive but the funding would allow for virtually no land preservation around the country,” said a staff member of the Land and Water Conservation Fund Coalition.

A bipartisan group of nine New Jersey members of Congress, Robert Andrews, Frank LoBiondo, Frank Pallone, Leonard Lance, Bill Pascrell, Steven Rothman, Donald Payne, Rush Holt and Albio Sires, have joined with 150 House members calling for “robust and consistent” funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Frelinghuysen did not sign the letter because of a tradition where members of appropriations committees do not take public positions on matters that will be before their committees. Frelinghuysen is a member of the House Appropriations Committee.