



NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS COALITION

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Press Release

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DEP Approval of Huntington Knolls Undermines Drinking Water Protections of Highlands Act

DEP Approval in Hunterdon County Shows Blatant Disregard for the Highlands Council's Findings and Governor Corzine's Demand for Interagency Coordination in EO 114

Holland Township, NJ: Today, leaders of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition expressed serious concern for the future of the drinking water protections set forth in the 2004 Highlands Act in light of a recent DEP approval for the massive Huntington Knolls project. The Department's actions show no regard for the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP), the Highlands Council's Inconsistency findings for the project, Governor Corzine's Executive Order 114 and the opportunity for sound, informed COAH planning at the municipal level.

"When the Legislature passed the Highlands Act in 2004, they envisioned permanent protections for the drinking water supplies that most of Northern New Jersey relies upon. The DEP's decision permitting the Huntington Knolls project completely undermines the sound recommendations of both the Highlands Council and Governor Corzine. It places our drinking water supplies on the chopping block," **explained Julia M. Somers, Executive Director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.**

The DEP Division of Watershed Management approved sewer service to an environmentally sensitive actively farmed 84 acre site in a mapped drinking water deficit area of Holland Township, to be known as the Huntington Knolls project. The decision tap dances around the scientifically founded concerns of the Highlands Council which were articulated to the DEP in a January 28, 2008 letter recommending a full denial of the project. Issues raised in the Council's letter include considerable impacts on mapped threatened and endangered species habitat, encroachment on C1 stream buffers, plans to build on steeply sloped areas of the site, drinking water deficit conditions on the site which will only be exacerbated, agricultural land cluster provisions being ignored, and increased development within the local wellhead protection areas.

"The recommendation by the Highlands Council to deny sewer service to the Huntington Knolls site for this project was founded on the best science and data anywhere in the State of New Jersey," **Eric Stiles, President of the Board of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition** noted. "By ignoring sound, capacity based planning in making this decision, the DEP has directly undermined over 5 years of work by the Highlands Council in developing a Regional Master Plan that actually protects the natural, cultural and drinking water resources mandated for protection by the Highlands Act in 2004."

"The DEP has gone from sound science to political science," **Stated Jeff Tittel, Director NJ Sierra (Policy Committee co-chair).** "This decision goes against good planning, the Highlands Act and the determination by the Highlands Council and will lead to more sprawl and water pollution."

"DEP should deny this project, as recommended by the Highlands Council," said **Bill Kibler, Executive Director of the South Branch Watershed Association.** "The Highlands Act and the Regional Master Plan are intended to protect both the quality and quantity of our water. DEP's approval of this massive development project is terrible for both."

Not only was the Highlands Council's recommendation to deny a permit for sewer service to the site ignored by the DEP, but the DEP also ignored Governor Corzine's clear direction for strict Highlands's resource protections and increased interagency coordination, laid out clearly in Governor Corzine's Executive Order 114. For instance, EO114 directs the DEP not to permit any development in drinking water deficit areas, until municipal plans are in place to address and remedy those deficit conditions. Holland Township does not have such a plan in place.

Holland Township is entirely within the Highlands Region, with 13,361 acres in the Planning Area and 1,961 acres in the Preservation Area. Holland Township has submitted a Notice of Intent to conform all of the lands in town to the provisions of the Highlands Regional Master Plan and is currently working under a Plan Conformance Grant from the Highlands Council to complete that work. More information is available on the Friends of Holland Highlands website: <http://www.hollandhighlands.org/>.

The New Jersey Highlands Coalition is calling on Commissioner Mark Mauriello to review the decision of the Division of Watershed Management in order to determine if the Department followed all directives of Executive Order 114, the Highlands Act's interagency coordination requirements, and the recommendations of the Highlands Council.

In signing Executive Order 114 on September 5th, requiring stricter enforcement by the DEP of the policies of the Regional Master Plan, **Chairman of the New Jersey Highlands Council, John Weingart was quoted in the Governor's Press Release as saying**, "The order provides a clear framework that will enable the Highlands Council and other State agencies to work together to protect the state's water resources while providing clear, coordinated guidance to Highlands municipal and county governments."

Because of the blatant disregard by the DEP for Executive Order 114 and the necessary directives therein, the New Jersey Highlands Coalition is also calling on Governor Jon Corzine to review the DEP's approval for Huntington Knolls. In addition, the Coalition is calling on the Governor to direct acting Commissioner Mauriello to respect the requirements of interagency coordination set forth in the 2004 Highlands Act and further reinforced by Executive Order 114. The Governor should ensure that no future DEP actions will be taken with such blatant disregard for the advanced science and capacity based regional planning conducted by the Highlands Council.

The New Jersey Highlands Coalition supports the scientifically based work of the Highlands Council in mapping critically important lands and preventing additional development where there is insufficient capacity to support that growth. The Huntington Knolls project site is a clear example of the ramifications of uncontrolled sprawling development which continues to threaten our drinking water supplies. It would include 29 buildings housing 116 residential units, a club house, an assisted living facility, 10,000 square feet of office space, and 17,000 square feet of retail space. Because the site is located in a mapped water deficit area, continued development without a Water Use and Conservation Management in place will threaten the ecological integrity of the groundwater and surface water supplies, as well as the public health and safety of residents who currently rely on the aquifer for their drinking water.

The Highlands Council's consistency determination for the Huntington Knolls project demonstrated numerous areas where the project was inconsistent with the Highlands Regional Master Plan and the requirements of the Highlands Act. Effective regional planning in the Highlands to protect the drinking water supplies for 5.4 million New Jersey residents and our State's three largest industries depends on the successful implementation of Highlands Regional Master by the Highlands Council and the DEP. Success in the Highlands cannot be realized until all State agencies recognize the advanced level of science and planning that has been conducted in the Highlands and follow the Legislative and Executive mandate to make the protection of drinking water resources paramount.

Resources:

- Executive Order 114 signed on September 5th, 2008 and the accompanying Press Release from the Governor's Office: [<http://www.state.nj.us/governor/news/news/2008/approved/20080905a.html>]
- Letter to the Division of Watershed Management from the Highlands Council dated January 28, 2008 recommending a DEP denial for sewer service to the Huntington Knolls site. [http://www.highlands.state.nj.us/njhighlands/about/calend/2008_meetings/wqmp_amendment_milford.pdf]

- Star Ledger Article from January 17, 2008: “Highlands Council Rejects First Development Project” [http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2008/01/highlands_council_rejects_firs.html]
- Holland Township’s Initial Assessment Report highlighting the implications of the Highlands Planning Process. [<http://www.hollandtownship.org/Templates/InitialAssessmentGrantReport20090303.pdf>]

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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