

Developers shouldn't get their way with N.J.'s drinking water supplies | Opinion

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By **Jake McNichol and Elliott Ruga**



The New Jersey Highlands Coalition has released a video of flyovers of the Round Valley and Spruce Run reservoirs in Hunterdon County and the Wanaque and Monksville reservoirs in Passaic County showing how the drought has impacted these sources of drinking water.

President Barack Obama's decision to permanently protect the Arctic Ocean and portions of the Atlantic Ocean from off-shore drilling is a huge win for our environment. With a stroke of his pen, the president has ensured some of the most critical ecological areas of our oceans will remain off-limits to oil and gas drilling.

These protections will stymie any Trump administration efforts to reopen these areas for drilling. However, other iconic and ecologically vital places are still vulnerable, and we need decision-makers in New Jersey and [Obama to do everything they can to protect them](#).

Once again the Christie administration manipulated the Legislature to get what they want, which was preventing them from blocking the Flood Hazard Rules.

Here in the Garden State, the Legislature must override the [proposed regulatory rollbacks](#) from the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection that would weaken protections for water quality in the New Jersey Highlands. On the national level, Obama should permanently protect the Grand Canyon and surrounding areas from toxic uranium mining.

The New Jersey Highlands are home to abundant natural, cultural and scenic resources, including dozens of the best hiking trails on the East Coast and more than 400,000 acres of

nearly contiguous, ecologically healthy forest. In addition, the Highlands act as a natural water filter to provide clean drinking water for more than 6 million New Jerseyans.

Sadly, shortsighted developers and the Christie administration are working to weaken the landmark Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act of 2004 by decreasing the minimum acreage required to build a new home with a septic system by nearly 400 percent.

The original acreage requirement was put in place to ensure the human waste generated in new homes would be diluted enough not to degrade the Highlands drinking water supplies. Now the DEP wants to change these regulations to benefit a small group of developers who would like to expand development in the forested regions of the Highlands.

This rollback not only violates the legislative intent of the Highlands Act, it also makes it clear that developers' interests take precedence over preserving the forested watersheds that provide drinking water for 70 percent of New Jerseyans.

Beyond our borders, [the Grand Canyon faces similar threats](#). Right now, mining companies are planning thousands of uranium mine sites around the canyon, including one mine just six miles away from the canyon's popular South Rim. Past mining has already devastated the Grand Canyon, and opening new mines threatens to tear up the landscapes that make this area special, kill off endangered species such as the California condor, and destroy thousands of Native American archaeological sites. Worst of all, expanding mining in and around the canyon could contaminate the Colorado River watershed, which provides drinking water for 25 million people.

The New Jersey Conservation Foundation is asking people to oppose the Department of Environmental Protection's proposal to relax rules surrounding drinking water protection in New Jersey's Highlands region.

Fortunately, Obama can permanently protect the Grand Canyon and nearly 2 million additional acres of land from this dirty and dangerous mining by creating the Greater Grand Canyon Heritage National Monument. More than 80 percent of residents who live in the area support the monument, and Obama already instituted a temporary ban on mining in 2012. Now it only makes sense that he finish the job during his final month in office.

We must urge the Legislature to override the DEP's attempt to weaken the Highlands Act so we can ensure this vital source of clean drinking water remains pure, and Obama should expand his environmental legacy by permanently protecting the Grand Canyon and its surrounding areas from dangerous uranium mining.

We should never take our iconic natural landscapes and sources of drinking water for granted. And with President-elect Donald Trump about to take the oath of office, it is now more important than ever that we be vigilant about protecting our valuable natural heritage, both here in New Jersey and across the United States.

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