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Groups Rally to Save the Highlands and NJ's Drinking Water ***Christie Administration Adds Highlands to Growing List of Gifts to Development Interests***

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(Trenton) Alarmed by Governor Christie's escalating rollbacks of environmental regulations, New Jersey's leading environmental groups gathered on the steps of the Statehouse today to launch a campaign to protect the Highlands and its crucial supply of drinking water from the very agency charged with protecting the environment. Following a series of sweeping rollbacks proposed in the regulations that address flood prevention, water quality, water supply and sewerage treatment, the Christie Administration intends to open up the Highlands Preservation Area—the nearly contiguous, 450,000-acre forest that provides our drinking water—to more intensive development and sprawl, threatening NJ's water supply.

“Because the Highlands are currently protected by the Highlands Act, New Jersey should be secure with a plentiful supply of drinking water. In the coming years our economic stability will increasingly depend on the water supplied by the Highlands. It is our guarantee that New Jersey will never suffer a drought crisis of the magnitude Californians endure today. However, by significantly relaxing limitations on development in the Preservation Area, as well as weakening other DEP protections in the Planning Area, not only is the Department ignoring the anti-degradation provisions mandated by the Highlands Act, it is threatening New Jersey's long term economic viability. This Administration is cashing in on our future,” **said Elliott Ruga, Policy Director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.**

“Today we are starting a battle to protect the Highlands and our drinking water. Governor Christie has declared war on the Highlands and the drinking water for over 5 and a half million people. The Christie Administration is continuing the attack on the protections of the Highlands region by rolling back critical rules. The just proposed Water Quality Management Planning Rules will open up development in the Highlands Preservation area by 400 percent. This rule will allow development in environmentally sensitive areas and should be called the ‘Dirty Water Rule for Developers,’” **said Jeff Tittel, Director of the New Jersey Sierra Club.** “The Governor said he wanted to repeal the Highlands Act, but he said the legislature won't let him. So instead, he is trying to repeal the Act one rollback at a time, one rule proposal at a time, and one Highlands Council appointment at a time. This is part of his attacks on clean water; category 1 streams, rolling back the Flood Hazard Rules, Coastal Rules, and Stormwater Management Rules. With these rules, the Governor has sided with developers and land speculators over clean water and is trying to sacrifice the Highlands for his national political ambitions. That is why we are launching this campaign to save the Highlands again.”

“Protecting the Highlands is fundamental to ensuring that we have enough clean water for Garden State residents and their children to drink. For over 30 years ANJEC has been advising local municipalities to protect streams and to create stream buffers because we know it's important,” **said Jennifer M. Coffey, ANJEC Executive Director.** “Now we have a State agency in denial and undoing the progressive management rules currently in place. In a word, this is ‘backsliding’ and must be reversed.”

“DEP is required—by law—to improve water quality in the Highlands,” noted **Bill Kibler, Director of Policy for the Raritan Headwaters Association**. “Increasing sprawl won’t make our drinking water safer, and DEP knows it. Instead, they’re following the Governor’s lead by selling out our future to his campaign donors. Future generations can either praise us for protecting their clean water or curse us for squandering their legacy. DEP needs to get back to the business of protecting our drinking water.”

“Gov. Christie said he wanted to dismantle the Highlands Act. Now, NJDEP is following through on the Governor’s promise,” said **Doug O’Malley, director of Environment New Jersey**. “These proposed rules are a massive unwinding of the long fought protections for the Highlands region, especially the rollbacks for headwater streams. Half of New Jersey depends on this water supply, and these rules will make it easier to pollute these streams, and destroy stream buffers.”

Wilma Frey, Senior Policy Manager, New Jersey Conservation Foundation said, “Over 100 years ago, the critical importance of protecting the Highlands for its water supply was recognized. In 1907, the New Jersey Potable Water Commission stated: *‘The Highlands watersheds are the best in the State... and should be preserved from pollution at all hazards...There has been too much laxness in the past regarding this important matter.’* It took numerous reports over many years – federal, interstate, state and local – documenting the necessity of preserving the region’s resources, and decades of pressure by concerned citizens, before New Jersey finally had a convergence of political leadership and political will, and took real action to protect Highlands water with the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act in 2004. Now – the current Administration plans to weaken the rules that protect this precious water quality and supply.”

"Governor Christie's proposed rollbacks in the Highlands gut hard fought critical safeguards. If adopted, they would mean more flooding and contaminated drinking water. What the governor, his DEP leadership team, and their press lackeys call 'red tape', 'roadblocks to development', and 'common sense' for builders, the vast majority, including DEP rank and file, call keeping people out of harm's way and protecting public health. It's past time Christie stopped pillaging New Jersey for his failed presidential campaign and started undoing the damage to New Jersey that he has wrought," said **Dave Pringle, Campaign Director for Clean Water Action**.

DEP has met with some of the groups participating in today’s rally to advise them of the Department’s intention to increase by nearly 400% the number of allowed new septic systems —or, septic system yields—in the Highlands Preservation Area and that the change will be a component of modifications to the Highlands Preservation Area Rules, to be proposed later in the Fall.

Elliott Ruga added, “The Highlands Act instructed the DEP to adopt regulations that ‘prohibit or limit to the maximum extent possible construction or development which is incompatible with preservation.’ Weakening the NJDEP Highlands Rules to allow a four-fold increase in residential development on septic systems will further fragment the core forests that protect the Highlands water supply, add impervious cover that will reduce groundwater recharge and degrade the quality of groundwater. The Administration’s intentions are inconsistent with the intent of the Legislation and it demonstrates a fundamental disregard for their obligations as the guardian of our public trust resources.”

The campaign to Save the Highlands includes the NJ Highlands Coalition, the New Jersey Sierra Club, Environment NJ, NJ Clean Water Action, NJ League of Conservation Voters, NJ Conservation Foundation, Association of NJ Environmental Commissions, and the Raritan Headwaters Association.

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