

New Jersey Hills Media Group



HIGHLANDS HIGHLIGHTS: New Jersey Forests Forum 2022

Elliott Ruga, New Jersey Hills Media, January 18th, 2022

The New Jersey Forests Forum will take place virtually on January 25th, 1PM - 4PM

[Register online here](#). This event is free and open to everyone.

Stewardship of New Jersey's Publicly Owned Forests

Forests cover approximately 2 million acres in New Jersey, equally split between forests that are publicly and privately owned. Considering the natural resource values provided to us by our forests: water resource production and storage; habitats for a wide diversity of plant and animal species; multiple options for outdoor recreation; air filtration; flood control; carbon absorption and storage; aesthetic appreciation; spiritual renewal—what are we doing to ensure the long-term viability of these forests?

As the climate warms, the carbon sequestration potential of the forest is increasingly critical for mitigating against climate impacts.

Yet New Jersey has no standards specifically for the stewardship of our publicly owned forests. Currently, we make no distinction between the privately owned and publicly owned forest. The standards by which forest stewardship plans for public forests are held are the criteria developed to qualify privately owned farmland and woodlands for a significant reduction in property taxes as an incentive not to develop their property.

We need to approach the restoration, management and stewardship of our public forests with higher standards that maximize the forest's ecological services and natural resource values, including carbon sequestration, without compromising because of concerns about infringing on private property rights.

Under current practices, we tread very carefully, as if private property rights were at risk of being tread upon. For example, one of the Highlands Act's 17 exemptions includes an exemption for woodland management plans or the normal harvesting of forest products in accordance with a forest management plan approved by the State Forester. This exemption is perfectly reasonable for private property. But why would we exempt a forest stewardship plan for public lands from the Highlands Acts prohibitions on disturbances inside of the 300' Highlands Open Water Buffer, inside a vernal pool's 1000' buffer, or on steep slopes? Inside of the nearly pristine Highlands' core forest, why would we allow activities that threaten the natural resource values on lands the public purchased specifically to protect those resources from disturbances?

Some might say that forestry activities differ from development activities, that they are not permanent and therefore should not be as strictly regulated. We do not agree. The impacts of mechanized logging activities are devastating to sensitive ecologies, they provide footholds for non-native species invasions, they destroy occupied habitats, they disrupt hydrologic flows—plus the area of impact is far greater than the mere footprint of the disturbance.

In the State's Flood Hazard Area Control Act rules, which implements a regulated riparian zone, forestry activities are exempt if the *New Jersey Forestry and Wetlands Best Management Practices Manual* is followed. That manual hasn't been updated since 1995, pre-dating current Wetlands and Flood Hazard Area rules, contemporary science and research, a better understanding of the functional values of wetlands and riparian areas and the entire context of a changing climate.

That we cannot implement the highest level of protection, on our most environmentally sensitive and resource rich forests, that we have purchased with the intention of protecting, defies logic.

Currently, forest stewardship in places such as Sparta Mountain, are implemented in the context of habitat manipulation projects, that is, to promote a certain habitat that favors a species in decline. The costs of implementing such a project are recovered by allowing the contractor to take out timber that is felled in the operation and to sell it for the timber value. The problem with such an approach is that the management operation must be large enough so that the contractor can extract enough timber that it is worth their time. In such cases board/feet considerations become more important than the ecological goal, and the size of the operation and its impacts can far exceed what is needed to meet the ecological goals of the project.

The public lands where forest stewardship projects are proposed are in our most mature and ecologically vibrant forests—places that need stewardship the least—but that is where tallest, straightest, most healthy trees still exist in New Jersey. Where stewardship is most needed—the forests with the highest deer populations and the most invaded by non-native species—these are where stewardship is badly needed, but rarely proposed.

This is why we need regulations that address forest stewardship for publicly owned forests, so that stewardship occurs where it is most needed and a system to pay for stewardship is put in place that does not include the harvesting of timber.

Senator Bob Smith (D-17 Middlesex), chair of the Senate Environment & Energy Committee intends to propose legislation this year to address forest stewardship standards for public lands. In order to educate the public and other interested stakeholders on the issues concerning forest stewardship on public lands, the New Jersey Highlands Coalition is presenting a virtual New Jersey Forests Forum on January 25, 1:00PM- 4:00PM. Information about the Forum and free registration is at njhighlandscoalition.org/protectourforests.

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