

New Jersey's recent investment in urban forestry and management of established public forests at cross purposes, says advocacy group

(Boonton, NJ) The New Jersey Highlands Coalition releases the following statement today in response to New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Shawn LaTourette's announcement of the Murphy Administration's awarding of \$24.3 million in Natural Climate Solutions Grants.

Urban tree planting has many benefits, from flood mitigation to air filtration, cooling cityscapes in the summer, reversing blight, providing carbon capture to mitigate against greenhouse gas emissions, and improving the overall quality of life in New Jersey's cities. We applaud Governor Murphy in making this significant and wise investment in projects to establish urban canopies in Atlantic City, Berkeley Heights, Camden, Kearny, Linden, Newark, Brick, Stafford, Princeton, Trenton and Readington, and awarding grants to implement many of these projects to organizations with histories of excellence in greening urban New Jersey, such as New Jersey Conservation Foundation, American Littoral Society, the Nature Conservancy and Partnership for the Delaware River Estuary.

But we must caution the Governor that, no matter how many trees are newly planted, or how many acres of tidal salt marshes are restored, if at the same time his Division of Fish & Wildlife continues to cut down mature forest stands in established forests, or the Green Acres Program approves Forest Stewardship Plans that clear cut acres of public forests, the Governor's climate mitigation strategies will result in a zero-sum gain, or worse.

Today, on a regular schedule, acres of mature forests are clear-cut in New Jersey's publicly owned forests justified and funded by the Young Forest Initiative, to access New Jersey's remaining mature and valuable timber in the name of spurious ecological goals of habitat restoration and enhancement. And if certain interests succeed, bills currently introduced in the Legislature, if passed, would require that all public forests of 25 acres or more, purchased in whole or in part with Green Acres funds, whether state, county, municipal or non-profit-owned, would be required to implement Forest Stewardship Plans where logging is encouraged.

In early 2021 we discovered that a town in Warren County had contracted with a State-approved forester to implement a 10-year a timber harvest plan of the type allowed under the pending bill. It was approved by the NJDEP and the State's Green Acres program and was for the expressed purpose of raising revenue for the municipality by harvesting timber. If this type of harvest was to occur on all public forests of 25 acres or greater the impacts would be devastating, and the Governor's initiative to plant urban trees as a measure to mitigate for carbon emissions would not only would be meaningless, but silly.

A recent study by the US Department of Energy has shown that it would take 151 newly planted oak trees 16 years to equal the yearly carbon capture of one 40 foot oak tree, yet today we are cutting down 80-175 year old trees on public lands.

“There is a tremendous disconnect between what the Governor wants to achieve by positioning New Jersey’s public forests to mitigate for our carbon emissions and the State’s approval criteria for managing public forests. We continue to cut down our best defense against climate change,” said Elliott Ruga, Director of Policy and Communications at the New Jersey Highlands Coalition. “No amount of urban tree planting can make up for the loss of carbon capture from our mature forests when they are cut.”

Highlands Coalition board member, Dr. Sara Webb, Director of the Drew Forest Preserve and Professor emerita of Biology and Environment at Drew University said, “Our most mature forests in the Highlands provide society so much in the way of a clean water supply, habitats for the greatest diversity of species, accessible public recreation, carbon sequestration and more. Cutting down our oldest and tallest trees is so destructive to all of these resource values. It defies common sense that we continue to manage our high conservation forests in such a manner.”

“If we want to get serious about climate adaptation in New Jersey we must allow our most mature forests to transition to old growth”, said Julia Somers, Executive Director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition. “The harvesting of timber requires bringing heavy equipment into the forest, turning rudimentary foot paths into logging roads, which exposes forest soils to invasions by non-native species and creates habitats that nurture an already over-abundant deer population. Extracting timber prevents soil replenishment and the loss of favored habitat for many healthy forest indicator species such as fungi, insects, amphibians, birds and mammals.”

The New Jersey Highlands Coalition, which advocates for the protection of the region’s natural and cultural resources recognizes that the forests of the Highlands hold the greatest concentration of natural resource values, which is why the Coalition is leading the effort to protect public forests in New Jersey.