

N.J. Highlands Coalition helps champion local land preservation

SUSAN BLOOM, Correspondent 1:21 a.m. EST January 8, 2015



(Photo: Photo courtesy of Elliott Ruga)

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Some 5.4 million residents living in 292 communities in New Jersey might not be aware of an important environmental thread they share in common: They each receive some or all of their water from New Jersey's historic Highlands.

A widespread area that comprehends parts of four states, the Highlands is a unique region rich in resources and natural beauty and one whose preservation is key to the area's quality of life and future.

Stretching from western Connecticut through southern New York and into New Jersey (including most of Morris County) and Pennsylvania, the 240-mile, 3.5 million-acre Highlands region "is a physiographic province comprised of crystalline rocks with ridges, steep valleys and a rugged landscape," said Elliott Ruga, senior policy analyst and campaign coordinator at the New Jersey Highlands Coalition in Boonton.

"Representing the beginning of the Appalachian range, the Highlands is a geologically old formation that features the eroded remains of a mountain range that was, at one time, higher than the Himalayas," said Ruga.

He said that the Highlands is an important area to New Jersey for several reasons.

"First, more than half of the state's population sources water from the Highlands," said Ruga. "In fact, because the cost of water in New Jersey is the fourth lowest in the nation, companies that use a lot of water in their operations — such as Anheuser-Busch, whose Newark Airport-based plant uses as much water per day as the entire city of Bayonne — often choose to locate in the Garden State."

In addition, if people value beauty, the Highlands region offers a tremendous amount of pristine, undisturbed beauty based on its wealth of forests and natural resources, Ruga said.

The area is not without its challenges, however.

"The issue in the Highlands involves the age-old struggle between those who desire to protect the land and its resources, and those who want to maximize its short-term economic value," Ruga said. "Conflicts involving quality of life, privacy and ownership further add to the complexity of this battle."

Single-pointed focus

First launched in 1988 as a program focused on Highlands preservation within the Far Hills-based New Jersey Conservation Foundation, Ruga said that the New Jersey Highlands Coalition ultimately incorporated and became a 501c3 of its own in 2006.

"Our mission is to advocate for the water and other natural and cultural resources of New Jersey's Highlands," he explained.

And while he acknowledged that the organization doesn't necessarily have the resources to match those of many commercial entities, "we've always been successful in making it more challenging for those who want to develop the Highlands for their own short-term gain," he said. "By educating

people on why the area is important, why it needs to be protected and how it impacts them, we've made it more difficult to convert Highlands space into office parks from Mahwah to Phillipsburg."

Currently comprised of 800 individual members and nearly 80 environmental organizations with similar missions, including The Land Conservancy of New Jersey and The New Jersey Conservation Foundation, Ruga said the coalition works with such complementary grassroots efforts as Roxbury's REACT citizens group to champion environmental initiatives of local interest and also funds a small grants program to help support these types of projects.

"We also produce the Highlands Festival at Waterloo," Ruga said of the annual two-day fundraising event in Byram, which features live music, arts and crafts, food and educational opportunities. Taking place for its third year this September 19 to 20, "it's a celebration of all things Highlands," he said.

But it's perhaps its advocacy efforts for which the coalition is most renowned in the state.

In 1998, the Highlands Coalition led the U.S. Forest Service to conduct a study of the Highlands region in New York and New Jersey, an assessment that concluded that Highlands resources were critical to these states' economies but were being lost at an alarming rate each year due to sprawling development.

"In New Jersey, then-Governor Jim McGreevey appointed a Highlands Task Force to report on this concern in 2003, which led to the pursuit of regional land use planning and the ultimate passage of the Highlands Water Protection & Planning Act, also known as the Highlands Act of 2004," Ruga said.

Among other activities, Ruga said that the act created the formation of a separate organization (known as the Highlands Council) to help draft a master plan for balancing preservation and economic growth.

As another outcome of the Highlands Act, the Highlands was divided into two distinct regions — a largely forested and preserved area placed under the regulatory jurisdiction of the Department of Environmental Protection and a planning area guided by municipalities — "but the goals of both are to protect resources and balance growth," he said.

New federal funding announced

In a positive development last month, the New Jersey Highlands Coalition was pleased to announce the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's recent receipt of \$3 million to distribute throughout the Highlands region within all four states in 2015, \$750,000 of which has been earmarked for use in New Jersey.

“Between 2000 and 2012, over 106,000 acres in the Highlands area were successfully purchased for preservation,” Ruga said, “so this funding for land acquisition makes an important contribution to ecological service in the region and shows the federal government’s commitment to the Highlands region as an important natural resource that they’re willing to invest in. However, more work needs to be done.”

Among the key supporters and sponsors of the Highlands Conservation Act over the past decade has been U.S. Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen, who welcomed the release of the funding with optimism.

Through this federal funding, he said, “we’re safeguarding the air we breathe and the water we drink, and the state of New Jersey can move forward with important land conservation projects that protect open space, sources of drinking water and habitat for wildlife species.”

“We’re very grateful to our congressional delegation, and particularly to Rodney Frelinghuysen, for leading the way on securing important funding for preservation in the New Jersey Highlands,” said Julia Somers, executive director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition. “We’re protecting our future when we preserve critical lands in the region.”

Ruga agreed with this win-win development for the Highlands. “The 2015 federal funding will go towards bulk purchases of important lands and help leverage and maximize state, county and municipal land preservation,” he said.

The New Jersey Highlands Coalition is located at 508 Main Street in Boonton and can be reached at 973-588-7190 or by visiting www.njhighlandscoalition.org.