Message from the Executive Director

Dear friends, as we approach the end of another year, there is so much exciting news to share: starting with NJ DEP’s proposal of 749 stream miles, 326 of them in the Highlands, as Category 1 (C-1) waters. This designation means these stretches of water will have a much higher level of protection, including 300’ buffers and more stringent discharge standards.

We finally have the first three nominations to the Highlands Council, filling vacant or long expired seats. The nominees are Bill Kibler, Dr. Dan Van Abs, and Wynnie-Fred Victor Hinds. Each of them is extremely qualified to sit on the Council, and they are strong advocates for the Highlands.

2019 also saw the occurrence of Harmful Algal Blooms that affected several of New Jersey’s lakes, ruining the summer for many New Jerseys. While a horrific event, it did spark meaningful dialogue about how we effectively manage runoff in New Jersey and the Highlands: a sobering wake up call to be sure!

Suffice it to say that the Coalition remains as busy as ever representing the interests of you, our valued members and supporters, and the Highlands natural resources.

Policy Update

We thought that convincing the Governor to nominate our recommendations to the Highlands Council would be the heavy lift. What is proving far more challenging is senatorial courtesy—the prerogative of any State Senator, whose Legislative District has one or more municipalities in the nominee’s county, to block a nomination. For example, Wynnie-Fred Hinds, as a resident of Essex County, has to be approved by six Senators. As of this writing, Senators Gill and Rice, have not approved her appointment, despite that for Senator Rice, whose district includes Newark, Wynnie’s appointment would greatly serve Newark’s interest.

The Highlands Council nominees include: Bill Kibler, Policy Director of Raritan Headwaters Association and former Coalition trustee and Policy Committee chair; Dan Van Abs, Associate Professor of Practice for Water, Society & Environment at Rutgers. Dr. Van Abs helped author the Highlands Regional Master Plan when he was Senior Director of Planning & Science at the Highlands Council. Add Dan’s senior positions at DEP and the NJ Water Supply Authority, and you have one of the the State’s foremost experts in water resource policy and science; and Wynnie-Fred Victor Hinds, co-chair of the Newark Environmental Commission and ANJEC’s Community Outreach Manager. Wynnie, as a resident of Newark, would add a much needed voice to the Council, considering that Newark has a huge interest in protecting water quality in the Highlands, with 32,000 acres of high quality forest buffering its five reservoirs. Also, Wynnie would be the first person of

We only succeed with support from our wonderful members!

Your legacy gift can help safeguard New Jersey’s precious Highlands. At the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, we are thankful for your incredible commitment to our mission and for your ongoing investment to help us protect the Highlands and its natural and cultural resources.

Season’s Greetings from the staff at the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.

I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone for their continued support over the last year and to join me in looking forward to the decade ahead. From all of us at the NJ Highlands Coalition, we wish you the best for the holidays and a very Happy New Year!

Elliott Ruga, Policy & Communications Director

Bamboo Brook, Chester, after an ice storm.

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Policy Update cont’d

color on the Council since the departure of Tahesha Way in 2009. These are all reasons for Senators Gill and Rice to enthusiastically support Winnie’s nomination. But, at times, Trenton can be the most inscrutable of places.

We expect DEP to adopt the proposed amendments to the Surface Water Quality Standards soon after the new year. Under these rules 749 miles of stream segments are proposed to be upgraded to Category-1. Almost half of those stream segments are located in the Highlands! This is an important step towards improving water quality throughout the State because antidegradation policies applicable to Category-1 waterbodies protect against any measurable changes to the existing water quality. Most streams proposed for the upgrades will see an increase in the size of the regulated riparian buffer, from 150 feet, on either side of the bank, to 300 feet. We enthusiastically support the upgrades, as reflected in the comment letter we submitted to DEP, which is posted on our website at Resources/Comments to Agencies.

We are also working with Raritan Headwaters Association and Environment New Jersey on a campaign for a special designation for all waterbodies in the Highlands, similar to the “Pinelands Water” designation, so that all waters in the Highlands would have the highest protection. This makes sense because the Highlands is the source of all of northern NJ’s major river systems: Raritan, Upper Delaware, Wallkill and Passaic—and that 70% of the State drinks Highlands water. Also, the Highlands Act specifies “restoration” of water quality, while C-1 designations protect only against degradation. A higher level of protection is needed so that the Act’s required “restoration” is pursued, which not only benefits water supplies, but also recreational uses, such as forest health, fishing, boating, and other activities.

HABs in the Highlands!

Zachary Cole, Outreach & Education Director

This summer the Highlands was forced to confront its first climate-driven crisis: Harmful Algal Blooms or HABs, which plagued some of the state’s lakes - including Lake Hopatcong, New Jersey’s largest lake—all season.

A HAB occurs when colonies of algae, simple plants that live in a body of water, grow out of control and release toxins harmful to people and animals. While the illnesses caused by HABs are rare, they can be severely debilitating, even fatal.

The principal factor that produces a HAB is an increased nutrient load entering the lake, particularly phosphorus, which feeds the algae, spurring the bloom. Other pollutants combined with long periods of warm temperatures also contribute to the bloom. At Lake Hopatcong, the combination of a heavy rainstorm followed by a long heat wave triggered the bloom reported right before the Fourth of July weekend. DEP instructed local health departments to post advisories against swimming in the Lake until the levels of toxins dropped to a safe threshold.

The timing of the bloom being reported was devastating for the local economies around the affected lakes, as the numbers of visitors were nowhere close to what the businesses in the area depend upon. Unfortunately, HABs are going to continue to plague New Jersey water bodies until municipalities start effectively controlling stormwater, which carries the nutrients the algae feed on, as well as a host of other nasty contaminants. Certainly stormwater is not the only factor here. However, until lake communities address this non-point source pollution, HABs could well become a recurring issue.

Throughout the Fall the Coalition collaborated with NJ LCV and ANJEC, as well as local community organizations, including the Lake Mohawk Country Club, Greenwood Lake Commission and the Coalition of Lake Associations to host three Forums educating the public about the causes of HABs and to propose solutions.

We invited Dr. Steve Souza, expert lake ecologist, Dr. Chris Obropta, stormwater and green infrastructure engineer, and Mr. James Cosgrove, environmental consultant, to present at each event. The Forums were well attended and proved useful venues for the public to learn about the facts, express their concerns, and propose ideas for how their community could prevent future outbreaks.

In March of 2019 Governor Murphy signed the NJ Flood Defense Act into law. This permissive legislation enables municipalities to levy a utility fee on property owners based on the area of impervious cover on their property. The revenue would be dedicated to update aging stormwater infrastructure, and to fund the construction of rain gardens and other green infrastructure projects.

Now it is up to local leaders to decide on a strategy that is most effective for their town, or region. The Coalition will continue to advocate for better stormwater management. HABs are only one manifestation of New Jersey’s persistent stormwater related problems. Only now, we have a solution.
This past August, the Coalition and our partners, the Pinelands Preservation Alliance and NJ Forest Watch, posted a new message on our billboard on E. State Street in Trenton. The billboard reads “Why is NJ cutting down its best defense against climate change?”. Standing right outside NJ DEP Headquarters, it is safe to say we caught their attention.

What actually prompted us to take this action was twofold. First, the forest stewardship project carried out at Sparta Mountain WMA destroyed environmentally sensitive features as a result of the heavy machinery used on site, and during wet conditions. Second, peer reviewed, new research is emerging about the critical role trees play in sequestering CO2 from our atmosphere. This is key to mitigating the worst impacts of climate change in the future. Reducing emissions alone will be insufficient.

In one study, *Intact Forests in the United States: Proforestation Mitigates Climate Change and Serves the Greatest Good* (Moomaw, et al.), the authors demonstrate how allowing trees to grow to their maximum ecological potential, to store carbon, and develop into a forest with its full complement of ecological services is the best management strategy for maturing forests. The authors call this approach *proforestation*.

Adopting a policy to manage the majority of New Jersey’s forested public lands this way would produce the best outcomes for the ecological health of the trees.

Traditionally, forest stewardship projects allow timber to be removed from the site to compensate the lumber companies contracted to carry out the work. However, this means that sites selected for management are based on the value of extractable timber, while the latest research is telling us these are the forests we should leave alone.

We are very hopeful now that New Jersey is back in RGGI (Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative), proceeds will soon be available for NJ DEP to fund real forest stewardship projects that recognize the real threats facing Highlands forests; invasive species, deer browse, and forest fragmentation. Now more than ever, we need to abandon the old way of stewarding our forests—and because of entrenched interests, we are working towards changing an entire culture. We must continue to push for ecologically sound forest stewardship practices in order to save New Jersey’s most productive assets for mitigating the impacts of climate change in order to secure a sustainable future.
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