

New Jersey Hills Media Group

HIGHLANDS HIGHLIGHTS: Why is New Jersey cutting down its best defense against climate change?

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Despite the most recent studies that suggest that mature trees are more efficient at sequestering carbon than young trees, New Jersey continues the practice of clearing hundreds of acres of mature forest in its dogged creation of young forests on state-owned lands.

And if a bill that is currently progressing in the state Legislature passes into law, all municipalities, counties and non-profit organizations that own 25 acres or more of forested lands for recreation and conservation purposes would be required to adopt and pay for forest stewardship plans that encourage similar logging practices.

Northern New Jersey's most intact, least fragmented and most ecologically vibrant forest is the 340 square mile core forest of the Highlands Preservation Area.

This forest is also the least impacted by invasive plant species and deer. This is a single forest, although it is an assembly of municipal, county and state-owned parks, water supply management lands, non-profit-owned preserves and private properties.

Improbably located in the more densely populated northern half of the most densely populated state, it provides an abundance of resources, including clean water, clean air, New Jersey's widest diversity of plant and animal species, and a multitude of accessible outdoor recreational opportunities.

It is a highly efficient natural engine for carbon sequestration, providing increasingly important mitigation for the state's greenhouse gas emissions. Large scale logging operations adversely impact every one of these resource values.

Although this forest is protected to some degree from human disturbances by the Highlands Act, logging is inexplicably exempt from the Highlands act and from state wetlands and flood hazard rules, when it is a component of an approved Forest Stewardship Plan (FSP).

Although Assembly bill A4843 does not require logging as a component of an FSP, since it does not provide any funding for the costs of compliance, logging is the only revenue generating option of an FSP.

Without a revenue option, the bill would amount to an unfunded mandate, which is prohibited by the New Jersey Constitution. And because most municipal and county budgets are painfully squeezed, logging public lands to the greatest extent allowed suddenly becomes a very attractive revenue option.

Surprisingly, most so-called stewardship plans in northern New Jersey today prescribe heavy logging of our most mature intact forests and our oldest trees, for their revenue.

Large swaths of forest are clear-cut, though that term is never used. Heavy equipment leaves ruts that expose forest soils to erosion. Invasive plants that are nearly impossible to control take over. Edge habitat is created, where deer thrive and which harm declining species of interior forests.

Wetlands, and their fragile amphibian communities, are often trampled. Carbon uptake services are lost, and stored carbon, in the extracted timber, is removed and ultimately released to the atmosphere.

A profitable market for New Jersey's timber is in wood pellets, shipped to the UK and China, used as biomass for energy generation. Although the carbon is released elsewhere, it ends up in our shared atmosphere, and with an irresponsibly large carbon footprint to get it there.

Adoption of an FSP provides a tax benefit to private landowners as an incentive to maintain, rather than develop their forest.

Publicly owned lands, however, need no such incentives as they are already permanently protected from development. Further, public lands that were purchased by governmental entities for recreation and conservation purposes should be protected for their full resource values— water resource production and protection; maintaining biodiversity; accessible and multiple recreation opportunities; mitigation for climate change; and more—all of which are negatively impacted by logging, which will proliferate across the state if this bill passes.

Can A4843 be improved? Yes, it could. Most of our forests need some stewardship that control invasive species and deer, that protect against damaging pathogens and insects such as the emerald ash borer and spotted lantern fly, that prescribe non-intensive targeted interventions that promote biodiversity, etc.

FSPs should include inventories of the tree, plant and animal populations, soil types, topographical and wetland features. These are all important aspects of understanding the forest ecology.

But timber extraction must be prohibited on publicly owned lands. Where trees die or blow down, the felled tree should remain in the forest, where as it slowly breaks down and returns to the soil, it will provide nourishment and shelter for creatures, plants and fungi of all sizes.

In the ecologically vibrant, Highlands core forest, as close as New Jersey gets to a wilderness area, we should do whatever we can to protect it—from logging and all other disturbances—because it is the only one of its kind remaining in northern New Jersey.

For now and future generations, it will continue providing clean water, absorbing and storing carbon, and so much more. All we have to do is not screw it up.

