

Fresh from the Highlands? Pressure on Newark's Drinking Water Spurs Citizen Action

By Ambreen Ali

When a group of concerned citizens formed the Newark Water Coalition three years ago, their focus was primarily on getting clean drinking water to residents whose water supply was tainted by lead. Elevated levels of the metal, which was leaching from old pipes in the city's aging water infrastructure, were appearing in blood samples of children.

Now that nearly all of the city's lead pipes have been [replaced with copper](#), the coalition is expanding its work to broader issues that threaten people's access to clean water. Among those is the very source of the city's water supply: 35,000 acres of forest in the New Jersey Highlands region, which contains rivers, streams, and reservoirs that are a precious source of pure drinking water for more than two-thirds of New Jerseyans – including much of the population of Newark.



Edison Bog, Sparta Mountain Wildlife Management Area. Photo by New Jersey Highlands Coalition



Clinton Reservoir (Newark Water Utility). Photo by New Jersey Highlands Coalition

In fact, Newark is the largest landowner in the Highlands, a region the city turned to in the early 1900s as a source for water when cholera and dysentery was spreading widely due to a polluted Passaic River.

Yet many Newark residents are unaware that their water is drawn from such a faraway and clean source, or that commercial development and logging threaten it. In 2004, New Jersey enacted The Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act, setting limits on development in

the area, but the Department of Environmental Protection can and does issue [waivers for a variety of reasons](#).

“The more you’re educated on this, the more you’re likely to say, ‘I have to stand up for this,’ or share information with other people,” said Anthony Diaz, co-founder of the Newark Water Coalition, who said the group is brainstorming ways to work with other environmental groups on raising public awareness about the Highlands. “We want to make sure clean drinking water is protected as a human right.”

Though they may seem worlds apart, the Highlands start just 35 miles from Newark, and what happens there has direct impact on Newark residents. Helping people see that is vital, Diaz noted.

Several other Newark-based groups are working on ways to connect residents to the Highlands. The city offers a summer day camp for kids at [Camp Watershed](#) on its Highlands property. Such programs are key for increasing access to the land for residents who rely on public transportation, said Tenisha Malcolm-Wint, director of Cities Programs at The Nature Conservancy, NJ Chapter.

“There’s a huge gap for residents in Newark, not even knowing these lands exist,” said Malcolm-Wint. She noted that since the preserved space where Newark’s water originates looks “drastically different” from the city itself, “There’s a bit of a disconnect. There is a need for residents to be more involved with policymakers around these efforts.”

United Parks as One, a citywide alliance of neighborhood park and garden groups in Newark, is working on a film about the Highlands to share with community groups around the city.

“Our goal is to heighten awareness of the area and encourage people to visit the area,” said Executive Director Carla Robinson. “It’s one thing to go to a park in the city, and it’s another to be able to access land...that’s still in this natural state.”

On the legislative front, the groups are working to strengthen the laws in place to preserve this region, and reduce ongoing exemptions for housing development and logging. There are also concerns about enforcement. Speaking about measures enacted to protect the environment, Diaz said, “Even if you have the right laws on the books, if nobody is enforcing them, then the laws don’t necessarily matter.”

“There are constant efforts to repeal the legislation or to weaken it,” said Elliott Ruga, policy director of the NJ Highlands Coalition, about laws to protect the environment. The nonprofit is working with other environmental and grassroots groups to raise public awareness about the Highlands and strengthen regulations that protect it. A broad coalition that includes

Ruga's group and The Nature Conservancy, NJ Chapter is also working on a proposal for ensuring green spaces remain in parts of the Highlands that are developed in the future.

Their efforts come as global warming is making the Highlands even more valuable for capturing carbon, as well as increasing its importance as a throughway for species migrating north in search of more amenable temperatures. The coalition calls the region a "pinch point," meaning that this narrow habitat that stretches from Warren County to Bergen County and through 332 municipalities is being crowded in on all sides by development.

"When you protect forests, it provides carbon storage, water quality, recreational use and economic opportunities," said Eric Olsen, project manager of the Delaware River and Bay Whole System at The Nature Conservancy, NJ Chapter. "There are so many layers to the value of these habitats."

"Our priority issue right now is protecting the Highlands core forest," Ruga added. "It's the most mature forest we have in New Jersey, and it's hugely important. There are creatures and plants that don't exist anywhere else because this forest is so big."



Rally against logging in publicly owned forest in Washington Township, Warren County, June 2021. Photo by New Jersey Highlands Coalition

NJ Senate Task Force Will Focus On Environmental Protection

New efforts to preserve the Highlands through legislative action kicked off in January at the New Jersey Forests Forum, a virtual event hosted by the NJ Highlands Coalition on Jan. 25 with over 350 participants.

Elliott Ruga, policy director for the coalition, opened the event by saying that permits for logging on publicly owned forests need to be banned. The Department of Environmental Protection currently has the authority to allow limited development and logging in the preserved area of the Highlands, and Ruga said some of the exemptions are threatening the region.

“The impacts from mechanized logging are devastating to sensitive ecology,” Ruga said. “They provide footholds for non-native species invasions. They destroy occupied habitat. They disrupt hydrological flows.”

Sen. Bob Smith, who represents five towns within Middlesex and Somerset counties and chairs the New Jersey Senate Environmental and Energy Committee, announced at the event that state lawmakers are planning to launch a taskforce in February to determine the future of forest stewardship.

“One of the reasons we’re in such trouble with global climate change is that we human beings have been attacking forests all over the world,” Smith said, noting that recent damage from Tropical Storm Ida demonstrated the need for forests, which absorb water and can help mitigate flooding. And since many New Jersey residents also rely on the Highlands as a water source, protecting the forests from pollution is crucial for maintaining the cleanliness of drinking water.

“We’re going the wrong way worldwide on forests,” Smith added. “In New Jersey, we can do better.”

The task force set, to launch on Feb. 10, will include community leaders with a broad range of perspectives on forest preservation. Smith invited anyone with an interest to [contact his office](#) and said he hopes the initiative will result in legislation that can pass soon. (Update

2022-02-11: Individuals interested in participating on or contributing to the Task Force should reach out to NJForestTaskForce@gmail.com).

The task force's main goal will be to find common ground on how to best preserve public forests in the state while allowing for some commercial development and logging.

But consensus has been difficult to achieve on forestry matters, particularly around the extent to which logging should be allowed in public forests. While there isn't much logging of public forests around the state so far, logging is increasing in the Highlands region and protective measures are necessary, according to the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.

"There are many, many diverging views on what is sustainability for forests and how they should be properly stewarded or managed," Smith said. "We want to have a forestry policy in New Jersey that is going to help us prevent as much climate change as we can and deal with this logging issue."