Greetings! In this edition of the Highlands Lookout I reflect on the New Jersey Highlands Coalition’s ongoing education and advocacy initiatives in two areas.

In November 2021 we co-hosted the Third Northwest New Jersey Rivers Conference with our partners in the Delaware River Watershed Initiative. This Conference featured workshops about water quality monitoring and stream restoration, and planning practices that protect local rivers. The theme of this virtual event was fostering sustainable economic development, and we were honored to have NJ DEP Assistant Commissioner Olivia Glenn share her vision for environmental justice in New Jersey in the Opening Plenary. Healthy rivers are important and vital economic drivers for the Highlands region.

More recently, in January, the Highlands Coalition hosted the first New Jersey Forests Forum, a virtual public event bringing presentations from experts about the real threats impacting the state’s forests, and explored opportunities to improve stewardship of public forests. Senator Bob Smith participated and announced the formation of a Task Force to begin developing a framework for legislation that will protect New Jersey’s forests. With this event the Coalition successfully set out the scientific evidence that will underpin our campaign to see improved science-based protections of public forests implemented in New Jersey.

At both of these events we were thrilled by the quality of presenters willing to share their expertise to advance our mission of protecting the natural resources in the Highlands, and the quality of the engagement from you—our wonderful members and supporters!

If you missed either of these events and would like to review any of the presentations, they are all available online at the Highlands Coalition YouTube Channel.

Elliott Ruga, Policy & Communications Director

Policy Update

A huge share of our policy focus is currently on forests. It takes a tremendous outlay of time and effort to institute changes in entrenched state policy, even more when powerful interests are invested in maintaining the status quo. It takes strategic planning, willing partners, patience, experience and vision. For the first time since we began in earnest to oppose the practice of logging on our public forests, a decade ago, we are finally beginning to make a difference. Until now we have been opposing individual Forest Stewardship Plans as they were proposed. To be effective we knew we needed to see to the development of a new State level policy. To continue opposing logging plans site-by-site would be untenable.

On January 25th we hosted the New Jersey Forests Forum, a three-hour series of presentations offered by experts in policy and science, calling for an end to the ecologically destructive practice of logging on public lands, and to initiate a program of ecological restoration. 761 people registered for this free virtual event, and well over 360 attended. Despite the gap between registration and participation, more people attended this forum than any of our prior virtual events. It is also important to note, those who registered all received links to the recordings of the presentations and the follow up materials.

In his introductory remarks to the Forum, Senator Bob Smith announced that he would be forming a Forestry Task Force. The Task Force would be charged with reaching out to all interested stakeholders to attempt to come to a consensus on addressing forest stewardship for publicly owned forests. That the Senator participated in the

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Road Salt’s Bitter Taste!

Joe Hernandez, Lopatcong Creek Initiative

As soon as the first snow begins to fall, the kids are out to celebrate with their favorite traditions: catching flakes on their tongues or building snowmen. I am sure we all remember our childhood winters fondly. As we get older however, that initial joy is overcome by the reality of our day-to-day responsibilities. Many of us have our shovels or plows at the ready, but there is one element in our toolbox that it seems is a must-use if we’re going to go anywhere, even if there’s only a 5 percent chance of flurries!

Granular sodium chloride, more commonly known as salt, has been one of the most widely used methods of removing snow and ice from roads and sidewalks since it was first applied in New Hampshire in 1938. Adding salt to water triggers a chemical reaction lowering the freezing point of water. This prevents falling snow from settling, melting it instead. To work most effectively, there must be some form of water on the roads, which is why sometimes brine, or a saltwater mix, may be distributed before a snowfall.

Accumulation of road salt on a local road

Today, it is not merely a matter of principle that we stop logging on public lands. It is an existential requirement. The conflict over our natural resources, between those who wish to exploit public forests for its extractive wealth and those who believe public forests should be allowed to mature into old growth, is an historic clash that goes back to the founding of the U.S. Forest Service and the competition between the “wise use of natural resources” position of Gifford Pinchot and the ecologists John Muir and Aldo Leopold, who believed in maintaining public forests as wilderness areas.

But when those conflicts were brewing after the turn of the last century, they did not need to consider the emerging threat facing us today: climate change. The choices we make for our public forests must incorporate forest restoration strategies that will maximize carbon sequestration. What we heard from the Forum’s scientists was that the strategy of proforestation—maximizing the natural resource values of the maturing forest by allowing their unimpeded growth into old forest is the fastest, most efficient way to absorb carbon from our atmosphere. The latest research is telling us that mature forests absorb carbon at the fastest rates possible, faster than any planted forest or any young forest.

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According to one analysis 48 billion pounds of salt are used nationwide in the USA every year on our roads, with the highest quantities being applied in the northeast. However, even at this scale, its effectiveness is not what you might assume. Salt needs specific conditions to melt ice, and often those conditions are not met. What is more, too often the quantity applied is far more than actually necessary. This leads to heaps of wasted salt left behind on roads.

This unused salt may appear harmless, but there are serious negative effects to both our environment and our everyday life. When snow melts, water running off non-absorbent surfaces like roads and sidewalks carries the salt granules into drains where they flow directly into local streams and on into our rivers raising the salinity above natural levels. This makes these waters uninhabitable for fish, invertebrates, and other wildlife that require specific water chemistry to survive. Another important thing to note is that road salt is not purified, and when dissolved it contaminates the water. This is the water directly absorbed by our aquifers and wells, flowing into our streams, and supplying our reservoirs.

While all this may sound grim, the solution is simple: avoid using salt when you can, or try reducing how much you use. You only need one cup of salt for every six square feet. Some regions in the country have replaced salt altogether by using sand. While sand doesn’t melt ice, it does provide traction. Unfortunately, a downside of using sand is it can cloud water in streams, and over time sediment deposits might change the course of waterways.

Hopefully as environmental awareness increases we will see more alternatives to salt to keep us safe.
The Great Waters of New Jersey
Zachary Cole, Outreach & Education Director

Great Waters New Jersey is a collaborative initiative organized by the Musconetcong Watershed Association and the New Jersey Highlands Coalition with several other local partners in the Delaware River Watershed. Our objective is to celebrate and raise awareness about the incredible rivers in northern New Jersey.

Our Highlands rivers are vital to millions of people’s water supply, they sustain farms and vineyards, and are an important economic driver through the outstanding recreational opportunities they offer.

Great Waters NJ is committed to moving the state to recognize the recreational value of our waters and waterfront lands, offer leadership to resolve gaps in our region’s regulations that leave our priceless water and waterways vulnerable to contamination, and advocate for better protections at the headwaters of rivers and streams. Further, this collaboration will provide tools for federal, state, and local leaders to work together to preserve the quality of our National Wild & Scenic Rivers.

Through Great Waters NJ, we are advocating that NJ DEP adopt a Recreational Use standard that would assess how a river or stream is actually used when determining its level of protection. Currently NJ DEP only takes account of ecological and fisheries values when considering designation of a river segment. The Department has no working process for actually assessing a river or stream’s value to the community for recreation or as part of its public water supply even when a particular river or waterway is primarily used for recreation or sourcing drinking water. Enacting this new standard would keep our waters clean and allow everyone to safely enjoy our rivers for years to come.

Equally important, we are urging the NJ DEP to upgrade all the waters in the Highlands to a Category One Anti-Degradation Designation for their critical significance to northern New Jersey’s water supply. Many of the rivers and streams that provide us our drinking water are inadequately protected at their headwaters. Existing standards only consider surface water quality way downstream thus leaving the sources of the water vulnerable to contamination. The effect of upgrading these Highlands waterways to C-1 would afford them much greater protection in line with the purpose of the Highlands Water Protection & Planning Act.

More information about these issues and how we can address them is available on the Great Waters NJ website (www.greatwatersnj.org). Also online are several useful resources to learn about where and how to explore these special river environments with your friends and family. Over the upcoming year, the Great Waters Partners will be leading outings - hikes and floats, around and on northern New Jersey’s splendid rivers.

Upcoming Events
Hannah Smith, Development Associate

For 2022 the Highlands Coalition is already planning a variety of fun and interesting ways to learn about and explore our splendid region. Details and links to register are listed in the Events section of our website.

NJ Highlands Geology Car Trek
Sunday March 27th
Get ready to discover hidden geological treasures sprinkled throughout the Highlands on our Highlands Geology Car Trek. Participants will meet at High Marques Motor Cars to check in and get their map. Then hit the road to learn about the dramatic and violent history that shaped our region’s stunning landscape. This Car Trek is gonna rock!

7th Annual Golf Outing Tuesday
May 10th, Hawk Pointe Golf Club
Up next is our Seventh Annual Golf Outing, held at Hawk Pointe Golf Club on May 10th. In addition to the golf, we will also be offering a photography workshop lead by expert Dwight Hiscano, a well-known professional photographer and Coalition Trustee. We’ll also be offering our popular silent auction where you can bid on fun items including some exciting vacation getaways.

NJ Highlands Hike-a-Thon
June 1st-30th
This summer, get ready for our Hike-a-Thon! Participants can walk, hike, bike, swim, and paddle as many miles as they can during the month of June. Get outdoors and explore; maybe you’ll discover a new local park! You can compete as an individual or in a team with your friends. Everyone tracks their miles and can win fun prizes! If you have friends who want to get involved but prefer the A/C in the summer, they can support you by pledging to donate to the Coalition for every mile you finish! Lace up your boots and get ready to sweat!
Winter Newsletter 2022

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Or make your donation online at www.njhighlandscoalition.org/hldonations

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Meet your personal, financial and estate planning goals by making a lifetime or testamentary charitable gift that expresses your affection for the New Jersey Highlands. Contact Julia Somers for more information: 973-588-7190, or julia@njhighlandscoalition.org

The New Jersey Highlands Coalition is a nonprofit organization made up of groups and individuals committed to a common goal of helping protect, enhance and restore the New Jersey Highlands.

You can help.

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