Message from the Executive Director

It feels like just yesterday that I was putting the finishing touches on our last newsletter. Each year at the New Jersey Highlands Coalition time seems to move ever faster and, with its passing, we see positive change.

The heart of what we do at the Coalition has always been change: whether it’s how we address climate change, preserve our farmlands from inappropriate development, or tackle the issues of inequality in our diverse communities, I am extremely proud of all that we have done together over this last decade and a half. I am grateful every day to be able to work alongside so many passionate, committed, and experienced people who dedicate themselves to creating a more inclusive, sustainable, healthier future for New Jersey.

Change is not easy and is often unwelcome. It can be uncomfortable and difficult, especially for those of us who have “always done things this way.” The future is always changing, and we rise to face the challenges our children and grandchildren will inherit. One of the greatest changes that readers of our most recent newsletters will be familiar with, is how we should manage our public forests to mitigate climate change and preserve their ecological health most effectively.

The last year has seen much activity on that front. This past February, the Forest Task Force (FTF) convened by NJ Senator Bob Smith released its final report in Trenton to the joint Senate and Assembly Environment Committees. Our Policy Director Elliott Ruga and members of our Natural Heritage Committee testified that, although the report has many good recommendations (the majority of which came from our members), it does not address one of the greatest threats to our forests: logging. That the FTF report supports the status quo of allowing NJDEP to continue to log our public lands is the principal reason we could not sign on in support of the report.

As we enter the next phase of the process in which we are engaged, I am proud to announce that we will be working with our partners on a new campaign: Forever Wild NJ.

This campaign will embody our recommendations that New Jersey’s public forests be forever protected, restored, and allowed to resume their natural process of succession to benefit our climate future, ecological health, recreational opportunities and for the complete enjoyment of the New Jersey residents whose tax dollars paid for their protection.

Policy Update

When the Highlands Regional Master Plan was adopted in 2008, the Highlands Council reported that 114 of the Highlands’ 183 subwatersheds were in a deficit of Net Water Availability. This meant that, in more than 60% of the Highlands’ subwatersheds, existing water uses exceeded the sustainable supply of water. Because one of the primary objectives of the Highlands Act was to secure a sustainable supply of clean water for New Jersey, the Highlands Council drafted policies intended to correct these deficits, including prohibiting activities that exacerbated existing deficits.

If a proposed development needed to expand and designate a new sewer service area or if the project was in a subwatershed that was identified as being in a deficit of New Water Availability, in addition to requiring enhanced groundwater recharge and water conservation measures on-site, the applicant would be required to work with the municipality and the Highlands Council to develop a detailed Water Use and Conservation Management Plan (WUCMP) that obligated the municipality to enact various measures to mitigate 125% - 200% of the total consumptive and depletive water uses, depending on the severity of the deficit, within the same subwatershed.

This mitigation included a permanent reduction of water use and the recharge of groundwater in excess of that required under Stormwater Management Rules. Except under very limited circumstances, The Highlands Council required these measures to be successfully completed prior to the initiation of the new water use. To ensure the successful long-term implementation of these
Policy Update  cont’d

measures, the Council also required monitoring and reporting mechanisms be put into place. Additional actions were specified if objectives were not met, and performance bonds were required to guarantee their successful implementation.

Over the past decade and a half, we have seen a relaxation of the requirements to address water deficits when a new or expanded sewer service area is approved as an amendment to an areawide Water Quality Management Plan. Prior to the Christie Administration, when a project proposed a new or expanded sewer service area, the project was held to all of the resource protection and smart growth standards of the Regional Master Plan (RMP). Now, if a project is proposed in the non-conforming Planning Area it is held solely to the RMP’s Net Water Availability provisions, which is a requirement of Executive Order 114 of 2008. Yet now even these policies are minimally, if at all enforced.

Since 2014, new and expanded sewer service areas proposed in deficit subwatersheds have only required that a WUCMP is drafted as a condition of approval, despite Executive Order 114 requiring full implementation prior to approval. There is never a completion schedule, monitoring program, or performance bond specified, despite the RMP requiring all of these. Because there is no enforcement mechanism, there is no way to determine if a developer follows through on any of these requirements.

The lack of enforcement of a fundamental objective of the Highlands Act is too important to ignore. We have already initiated a discussion with the Highlands Council and these concerns have been incorporated into our official comments submitted to DEP in response to several proposed amendments to Water Quality Management Plans. We have every reason to believe that the current Director of the Highlands Council will be responsive to our concerns.

Ebb and Flow in the Passaic

Dylan Medici, Manager of Outreach and Education

Few regions in the United States can claim such a diverse and storied history as the Passaic River watershed of northeast New Jersey. Like all of New Jersey, the lands of the Passaic were Lenapehoking: “home of the Lenape.” Indeed, the name “pahsayèk” is Munsee for “peaceful valley” and describes the flat meadows and marshes through which the river leisurely meandered on its course to the Newark Bay. The river’s fresh water, ample fish, and easy access to the bountiful forests of northwest New Jersey were well-known to the Lenape.

These qualities made the region instantly attractive to early European settlers. Making their way westward into New Jersey’s mountainous hinterlands, settlers discovered another bounty: iron. Over the course of the 18-20th centuries, hundreds of iron mines, furnaces, forges and mills sprang up to extract and work the valuable black ore from New Jersey’s mountains.

Immigrants followed the jobs, cities followed the immigrants, and canals and railroads were built to connect them. Very quickly, the “peaceful valley” of the Passaic was anything but.

Iron drove New Jersey towards an early industrial age. The economy boomed but at a cost; forests were stripped bare for charcoal, industrial waste and sewage choked its waterways, and poverty and disease dominated its cities. In the late 19th century, Newark – at the mouth of the Passaic River – had a reputation for having "the most unhealthful" water in the nation with rampant cases of cholera and dysentery. Its upstream communities were hardly better off.

Even when Big Iron left New Jersey, the Passaic still had a lot to give. Its abundance of water and proximity to Newark’s ports made it ideal for chemical manufacturing, and the

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The headwaters of many of northern New Jersey's major rivers, including the Passaic and the Raritan, begin their lives as small mountain streams, like the Trout Brook shown above, which flows into the Raritan from its headwaters in Chester. (photo: Dylan Medici)
undeveloped wetlands – worthless for major development – were convenient to use as landfills for New York and New Jersey’s growing cities. In an era before environmental protection, companies freely dumped toxic waste into its rivers and mines, earning New Jersey its unofficial nickname as the “Superfund State.”

Much progress has been made in cleaning up this toxic legacy, but with over 4,000 active contaminated sites in the Passaic alone, it takes a lot of voices to bring attention to our shared issues. For the many overburdened communities in the Passaic which have historically been suppressed, it can be impossible to be heard. This is why we have been working with our partners at Rutgers University, the Passaic River Coalition, the Newark Water Coalition, the Turtle Clan of the Ramapough Lunaape and others to create the Alliance for the Passaic Watershed: to amplify the voices of our communities and ensure positive change for those most in need.

Small Grants Program

Brielle Olshan, Director of Membership & Administration

One of the most impactful programs the New Jersey Highlands Coalition offers is our annual Small Grants Program. Reserved for small grassroots organizations and community initiatives, these grants of up to $5,000 provide essential funding for projects that protect, improve and enhance the water and other natural and cultural resources of the Highlands. Past projects have supported legal challenges, hired environmental experts, and enabled local cleanups, mapping, educational projects, and much more. What could your group accomplish with up to $5,000?

Grant applications are now being accepted for the 2023 Small Grant Program! Please share with your network to get the word out. The deadline to apply is June 1, 2023, and grants will be awarded at the October 11, 2023 Annual Meeting.

We invite all organizations and groups in the New Jersey Highlands to apply. Applicants do not need to be a registered 501(c)3 organization but do need to have a total annual operating budget under $200,000 and must become a member of the Coalition. We also have a well-established fiscal sponsorship program for groups that do not have the infrastructure in place to accept a grant.

Contact Brielle Olshan, Director of Membership and Administration at Brielle@NJHighlandscoalition.org for more info.

Backpacks, Backroads and the Back Nine

Jen Wanisko, Events Coordinator

The Coalition team has lined up a fun-packed year full of events in the Highlands.

On April 15, auto enthusiasts across the state enjoyed a scenic 60-mile tour on our Reservoirs of the Highlands Spring Car Trek. "Rain Check" tickets are still available on our website and provide the full route for you to drive at your own convenience.

On May 8th, golfers will hit the greens at Hawk Pointe Golf Club in Washington. The cost is $300 per golfer or $1,100 per foursome. For those more interested in enjoying the iconic scenery of the southern Highlands, professional photographers Dwight Hiscano and Blaine Rothauser, curator Donna Compton of NeoArt Gallery and our own Elliott Ruga will lead a concurrent photography workshop. The cost is $200 per person. Tickets for either include breakfast, lunch and snacks.

As spring gives way to summer, hikers, bikers and paddlers across the Highlands will be able to participate in our 2023 Hike-a-Thon. Registration opens June 1, so be sure to recruit your sponsors and get outside! The Hike-a-Thon is a great opportunity to enjoy the many trails and parks of the Highlands while supporting their protection.

Full details and registration for all our events can be found on our website at njhighlandscoalition.org/events. You can also keep up to date on all our events by joining our mailing list.

Our small grants program awarded Mahwah Environmental Volunteers Organization (MEVO) with funding to remove over 10,000 lbs of trash from Stag Hill in Mahwah. (photo: MEVO)

The Green Pond escarpment in Rockaway is prominently featured in many of our car treks, and is stunning at any time of year. (photo: Dylan Medici)
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Membership Contribution:
☐ $1,000  ☐ $500  ☐ $100  ☐ $50  ☐ $30  ☐ Other _______________

(Your contribution is tax deductible and may be eligible for a matching contribution by the company where you work. Please make checks payable to New Jersey Highlands Coalition.)

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