

HIGHLANDS TASK FORCE ACTION PLAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Highlands is New Jersey's last remaining large expanse of pristine mountain lakes and streams and unbroken forests. The region has long been recognized for its most significant natural resource -- drinking water -- which it supplies to over half of New Jerseyans. The region also possesses the greatest diversity of natural resources of any region in the State: 70% of its lands are environmentally sensitive; 370,000 acres of its lands are forested; and over 30 of the State's threatened or endangered species find suitable habitat there. A thriving agricultural sector sustains itself on 92,000 acres of agricultural land in the Highlands. The region also contains some of the State's most valuable historical and cultural sites, including sites from the Revolutionary War, New Jersey's early industrial age and Native American era. These rich resources provide an unsurpassed quality of life in the region. In recognition of its unique significance, the Highlands has been recognized as a special resource area by both the State and federal governments.

The Highlands is under threat, though, from population growth, large-lot residential subdivisions, increased deforestation and fragmentation and sprawl. Within the five-year period between 1995 and 2000, the Highlands lost -- perhaps forever -- 17,000 acres of forest and 8,000 acres of farmland. Growth pressures continue in the region with the trend for land consumption expected to average 3,000 acres every year. Unless these trends are altered and an effective regional approach to the Highlands adopted, the harm to the region will be severe and permanent.

Bold action is needed to protect the Highlands -- and its water resources -- for future generations. For that reason, the Task Force has formulated an action plan through which the State is poised to secure its place as a national leader in the preservation of water resources. The Task Force's key recommendations include the following:

- Identify a Preservation Area in the Highlands comprised of environmentally sensitive lands: The Task Force has established a methodology for identifying these lands. Once identified, the Legislature should officially designate the area by statute. Scientific data indicates that the Preservation Area covers between 350,000 and 390,000 acres of the approximately 800,000 in the Highlands.
- Enhance environmental regulations in the Preservation Area: The Legislature should authorize and direct the DEP to develop regulatory

standards and limits for land and natural resources uses, including impervious cover, steep slopes, waste water treatment extensions, water allocations and buffers on freshwater wetlands.

- Create a Highlands drinking water protection and regional planning council: The Legislature should establish a Highlands drinking water protection and regional planning council. The Council should be made up of a majority of county and local elected officials and should develop a regional master plan for the entire Highlands region that preserves natural resources and enhances sustainable growth and quality of life in the region. The Council should have independent, mandatory authority for planning, zoning and enforcement in the Preservation Area, and advisory authority outside it.
- Enhance the land preservation program in the Highlands: The Governor should immediately target the Preservation Area, particularly lands that provide the greatest protection for drinking water and large forested areas, for acquisition and protection.
- Provide Municipal Aid: There should be provision for municipal aid recognizing tax losses resulting from State acquisition of lands in the Preservation Area.
- Provide for Landowner Equity: The purchase of land or development rights in the Highlands using Garden State Preservation Trust funds should require the appraisal to determine values at two points in time -- both before and after DEP Highlands-specific regulations.
- Protect sensitive lands and agricultural lands outside the Preservation Area: In the case of environmentally sensitive lands, this should include prioritizing land acquisition in those areas and in the case of agriculture it should include expanded preservation efforts and cooperative programs to work with farmers.

Implementation of these recommendations will require concerted effort by the Governor, Legislature and State Agencies but success will mean the preservation of the Highlands in a truly historic way. The public has voiced its overwhelming support for bold action to protect drinking water and hundreds of people have spoken publicly and written to the Task Force calling for the immediate protection of the most environmentally sensitive lands. It is absolutely necessary to act on these recommendations now, to preserve our vital drinking water supplies and the quality of life in the region generations to come.