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Highlands Council Awarded \$2.4M for Preservation through Federal Highlands Conservation Act

CHESTER, N.J. — The Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council was recently notified of a \$2,420,000 award that will be used to help preserve more than 270 acres in portions of the Passaic and Wallkill Watershed Management Areas of the New Jersey Highlands Region. The funding comes through the federal Highlands Conservation Act Grant Program, administered by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and will be combined with matching funds to purchase conservation easements on five properties through the Highlands Development Credit (HDC) purchase program.

“We are very excited to have been awarded this funding that will help further our efforts to protect important natural resource lands in the Highlands Region,” explains Jim Rilee, Highlands Council Chairman. “The HDC program has attracted many interested applicants over the years and this grant allows us to increase the number of property owners that can benefit from it.”

The HDC purchase program is a Transfer of Development Rights program that allows property owners to apply for and receive credit allocations reflective of lost development potential, which they can then sell in exchange for restricting development on their land through a conservation easement. The conservation easement runs with the land, ensuring permanent protection.

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The five privately owned properties that have been identified for preservation are located in Passaic and Sussex Counties and lie within the “Protection Zone” of the New Jersey Highlands, which is considered the most sensitive of the three primary zones in the Highlands Land Use Capability Zone map. Properties are also located within high conservation value areas identified in the 2002 New York-New Jersey Highlands Regional Study as required by the USFWS grant program.

The Highlands Conservation Act was created in 2004 to support land conservation partnership projects in the four-state Highlands Region (Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania). The grant program was first funded in 2007 and has been funded annually, although funds were redirected away from the program in 2011, 2013, and 2014. Over the years, the Highlands Conservation Act grant program has awarded more than \$26M in funding, including nearly \$7M to New Jersey. Nearly 1,300 acres in the New Jersey Highlands have already been protected through this program. This is the first year that the Highlands Council has been the lead agency for this grant in New Jersey.

“We appreciate the efforts of Representative Rodney Frelinghuysen (NJ-11) who introduced the federal Highlands Conservation Act in 2004 and has been a tireless supporter of federal funding for the New Jersey Highlands,” says Margaret Nordstrom, Highlands Council Executive Director. “We look forward to working with our federal funding partners and Highlands property owners to complete this process to protect these lands.”

Once contracts with USFWS are completed, work will begin on finalizing transactions with participating landowners. The Highlands Council anticipates closing on all properties within 18-24 months.

The Highlands Council is a regional planning agency, established in 2004 with the passage of the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act and charged with implementation of the Act. More information is available at www.nj.gov/njhighlands

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