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835-Acre North Jersey Highlands Tract Preserved \$4.6 Million Deal Shows Christie Administration's Continued Commitment To Protecting The Highlands

TRENTON - A pristine 835-acre tract located in the heart of the North Jersey Highlands in Jefferson Township, and once slated for residential development, will be permanently preserved through a \$4.6 million agreement announced today by project partners, the Department of Environmental Protection, the federal government, the Trust for Public Land, Morris County, and Jefferson Township.

The newly preserved land, long known as the Baker Firestone or Baker Residential property, will greatly expand the DEP's Rockaway River Wildlife Management Area and provide land for local parks, said DEP Commissioner Bob Martin.

"This is another example of Governor Christie's commitment to preserving open and natural spaces in New Jersey, especially in the North Jersey Highlands, which offer some of the most unique and remarkable tracts in the state," said Commissioner Martin. "Preserving land in the Highlands is important because it is vital to the quality of drinking water for millions of state residents, ensures continued viable habitat for many plant and animal species, enhances recreational opportunities for our residents, and raises the quality of life in our state."

The property, long sought by conservation groups, had recently been bought by the Trust for Public Land as an interim conservation purchaser for \$4.6 million. Title to the land is being formally conveyed to the State of New Jersey and Jefferson Township, which will take ownership of 647 acres and 188 acres respectively.

DEP Assistant Commissioner for Natural and Historic Resources Rich Boornazian joined U.S. Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen, Morris County Freeholder Ann F. Grossi, Jefferson Mayor Russell Felter and Trust for Public Lands State Director Anthony Cucchi at an event in Jefferson this morning to announce the culmination of this conservation effort.

"When federal, state, county and local government agencies all come together to protect a tract of land, it is clearly an important property for conservation," said Cucchi. "This multi-layered partnership highlights not only the significance of one property, it also demonstrates the commitment that exists to conserve land and water resources throughout the Highlands."

The preservation agreement announced today will add 647 acres to the existing 3,007 acres of the Rockaway River Wildlife Management Area.

“This is a gorgeous tract of Highlands land that will be added to our Rockaway River Wildlife Management Area,” said Boornazian. “An already popular area for hiking, birding, hunting, fishing, nature viewing and other recreational activities will be further enhanced by the additional preserved acreage. It’s a real win for residents of New Jersey.”

Located in the state-designated Highlands Preservation Area, the newly preserved tract contains environmentally sensitive wetlands, steep slopes and habitat for a number of state and federally listed species, including the bobcat, golden-winged warbler, timber rattlesnake, red-shouldered hawk, Indiana bat, Cooper's hawk and barred owl. It also links to more than 3,000 additional acres of adjoining preserved lands.

In addition, this is part of the Musconetcong and Rockaway River watersheds, has a direct influence over water quality in Lake Shawnee and Lake Hopatcong. Also, preservation of this land helps protect the recharge area for Jefferson’s water supply.

Funding for the acquisition includes \$1.9 million in federal Highlands Conservation Act funds, \$1.6 million in New Jersey Green Acres State Land Acquisition funds for the 647-acres being transferred to the state, and \$800,000 from the Morris County Open Space Trust Fund and \$241,280 from a Green Acres Planning Incentive Grant awarded to Jefferson Township for the 188 acres to be transferred to Jefferson.

Rep. Frelinghuysen sponsored federal legislation that created the Highlands Conservation Act and has provided continuing federal support for the Highlands region of New Jersey.

“The federal Highlands Conservation Act was established in 2004 for just this purpose - to preserve important environmentally sensitive areas that sit amid congestion of northern New Jersey's densely populated suburban areas,” said Frelinghuysen. “With this conveyance, we are assisting the protection of open space, sources of drinking water and important wildlife species.”

County and Local officials also offered support for the project.

“The acquisition of this property ends years of efforts to preserve this property from development. Now it will provide many opportunities for both active and passive recreation,” said Jefferson Mayor Felter.

“This property, along with some 3,000 acres already preserved in the Wildlife Management Area, will provide recreation, safeguard wetland areas, preserve open space and provide habitat for endangered, plus common wildlife and plant species,” said Freeholder Grossi.