



STATE OF THE pinelands

2026 ANNUAL REPORT BY THE PINELANDS ALLIANCE



**Pinelands
Alliance**

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State of the Pinelands 2026

The Pinelands Alliance presents this annual report to sum up the health of the Pinelands preservation efforts by our federal, state, and local government agencies.

We seek to provide the public and the agencies themselves with a report card that we can all use to move forward and better protect this unique natural treasure.

This annual review of select actions or inactions of the last twelve months is the most comprehensive account of public policy actions that affect the Pinelands National Reserve.

We applied six criteria in assessing each action - namely, whether each action:

1. upholds the integrity of the Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP);
2. protects native habitats, for plants and wildlife;
3. safeguards the quality of Pinelands aquifers and surface waters;
4. ensures the integrity of the water supply for people and the ecosystem;
5. enhances the cultural and historic resources of the area; and
6. advances education about the Pinelands.

Where a government agency followed its rules and took appropriate action, we gave the agency a *thumbs up*. In cases where the agency drifted from its regulatory mandate and took an action that, in our opinion, was detrimental, we gave the agency a *thumbs down*.

Pinelands Alliance's Vision and Future Challenges

The State of the Pinelands offers us a moment each year to reflect upon changes shaping our region —some encouraging, others more challenging. As the new executive director, I value this annual record as a way to collectively understand our progress and the work that is still needed. It helps us see how our organization can evolve to deal with these changes and become more resilient for the future.

One of the changes that we instituted this year is a new name, logo, and mission statement. I provided more information about these revisions in our Fall newsletter, but put simply: this update reflects our belief in the power of partnership. The Alliance wanted to make our image reflect the importance of working together—as an alliance—to protect, support, and enhance people's lives and the environment. In a world that is increasingly at odds with this vision, it is more important than ever to bring people together and find common ground to ensure that the Pinelands National Reserve continues to thrive.

After working with Pinelands Alliance for over 20 years, I look forward to my new role and how I can help us achieve this vision. I am hopeful about what we can accomplish together, even as our societal culture of respect has been eroded and care for people and the environment has changed so much. We are constantly challenging the belief that public land and resources are there for unrestricted personal use. We must recognize that without shared responsibility, the tragedy of the commons can turn individual freedom into collective loss. Our public lands and natural resources belong to all of us. Caring for them requires not only passion but also a shared commitment to thoughtful, science-based decision-making.

The improvements we've seen in our air, water, and land quality are evidence that real progress is possible when communities and elected officials rely on data and real expertise to solve these problems. We cannot take this progress for granted. If we left everyone to self-govern their actions, we would be far behind where we are today. Strong, science-based protections benefit all of us. The challenge of creating and sustaining a culture that cares for the environment is a long-term battle, but necessary for our current and future generations. I embrace this challenge and hope that you will join me in continuing to protect the Pinelands we all cherish.



Jaclyn Rhoads
Executive Director



**Scan the QR code to read about
our new name, logo, and mission.**

The New Jersey Pinelands

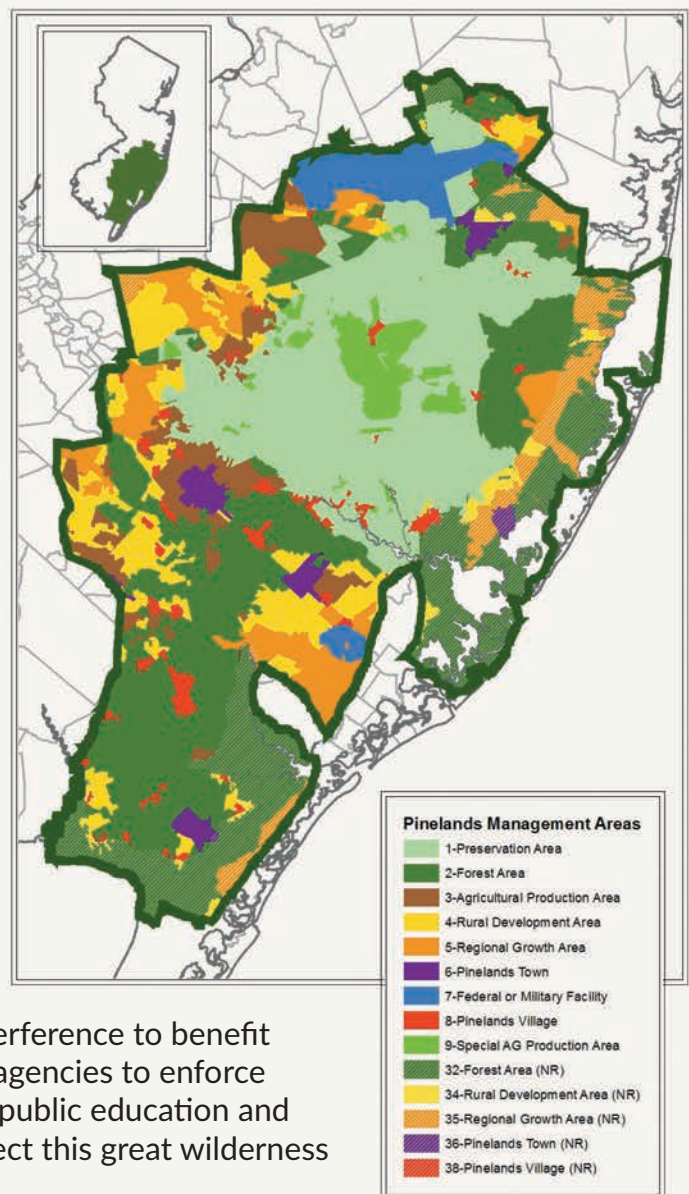
The Pine Barrens is a vast forested area extending across South Jersey's coastal plain. This important region protects the world's largest example of pitch pine barrens on Earth and the globally rare pygmy pine forests. One of the largest fresh water aquifers, the Kirkwood-Cohansey, lies underneath its forests and wetlands. The Pine Barrens is home to many rare species, some of which can now only be found here having been extirpated elsewhere.

In the 1960's, the Pine Barrens were threatened by a proposal to build the world's largest supersonic jetport and an accompanying city of 250,000 people. This proposal galvanized citizens, scientists and activists to find a way to permanently protect the Pinelands. In 1978 Congress passed the *National Parks and Recreation Act* which established the Pinelands National Reserve, our country's first. In 1979 New Jersey adopted the *Pinelands Protection Act*. This Act implemented the federal statute, created the Pinelands Commission, and directed the Commission to adopt a Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP) to manage development throughout the region.

Many residents do not know that all new development in the Pinelands is controlled by the nation's most innovative regional land use plan. The CMP is designed to preserve the pristine conditions found within the core of the Pinelands while accommodating human use and some growth around the periphery. The Pinelands Commission's staff of approximately 40 professionals is directed by 15 Commissioners who serve voluntarily. Seven Commissioners are appointed by the Governor with approval of the state Senate, seven by the counties in the Pinelands, and one by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior.

The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) also plays a key role in protecting the Pinelands. In addition to its job of implementing the CMP in the coastal zone, the NJDEP regulates the distribution of fresh water from the aquifers that lie beneath the Pinelands.

What the Pinelands Commission and NJDEP have accomplished in the Pinelands is remarkable. But this region faces an onslaught of threats in the form of political interference to benefit development projects, and the failure of state agencies to enforce Pinelands rules on a consistent basis. Through public education and advocacy the Pinelands Alliance works to protect this great wilderness and give the public a voice in its preservation.



Spotlight Issue:

Building Lasting, Layered Protections in Uncertain Times

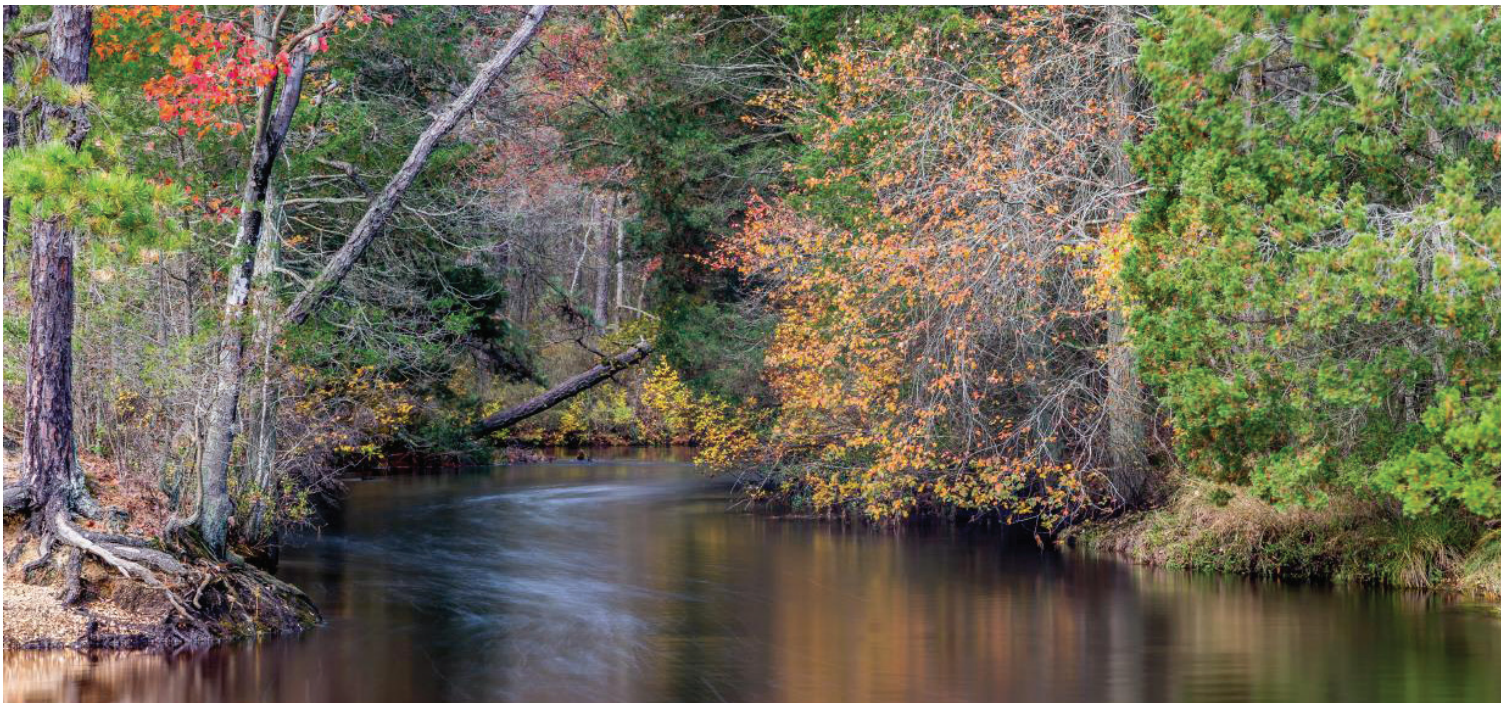
Many are dismayed by the federal administration's sudden rollbacks of environmental and public protections—and Pinelands Alliance is right there with you. A flurry of executive orders favoring fossil fuels, weakening endangered species safeguards, and slashing federal staff and funding threatens decades of hard-won progress.

The speed and scale of these changes show what's at stake. A March 1, 2025, order lifted protections on 280 million acres of federally-owned public land, opening them to aggressive logging and increased wildfire risk. On January 20, 2025, another order declared a "national energy emergency," sidelining key Endangered Species Act reviews and clearing the way for fossil fuel projects, while ironically also halting renewable energy development that could address the energy crisis. These contradictory policies accelerate climate change, endanger wildlife, and degrade air quality. As past progress unravels, it feels like we are going back in time. We cannot allow the work of past advocates to be undone on our watch.

Finding Strength in Layered Protections

Yet amid this turmoil, the Pinelands offer an important reminder: strong, overlapping protections matter. While federal rules are being dismantled at an alarming speed, New Jersey maintains some of the strongest environmental safeguards in the nation, and the Pinelands benefit from yet another layer through the Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP). These layers create a buffer—if one falters, others still stand. This moment underscores why we must defend every level of protection we have and never take any of them for granted.

One powerful step New Jersey can take is to create *another* layer of protection—one that cannot be easily undone by shifting political winds. A Green Amendment to the state constitution would establish every resident's right to clean air, pure water, and a healthy environment. Pinelands Alliance has been working to build momentum toward this goal: hosting town halls across the region, educating residents about what a Green Amendment would mean in practice, and



A Green Amendment establishes every resident's right to clean air, pure water, and a healthy environment. Photo by Charles Aitken



This is the Pinelands Commission Building, where Commissioners meet monthly with the public to review proposals and enforce the CMP.

advocating at the State House for legislative action. We have also encouraged towns and counties to adopt resolutions in support of this constitutional safeguard. With enough public pressure, New Jersey could enshrine environmental rights permanently, ensuring that no matter what happens in Washington, our state remains a bulwark for environmental protection.

Rules Need Enforcement

Rules meant to protect the environment are just words on a page if there are no government employees carrying out the daily work of applying and enforcing regulations. The Pinelands are privileged to have the Pinelands Commission, whose Commissioners and staff uphold and execute the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan. However, nothing is completely

sheltered from the sweeping changes happening at the federal level.

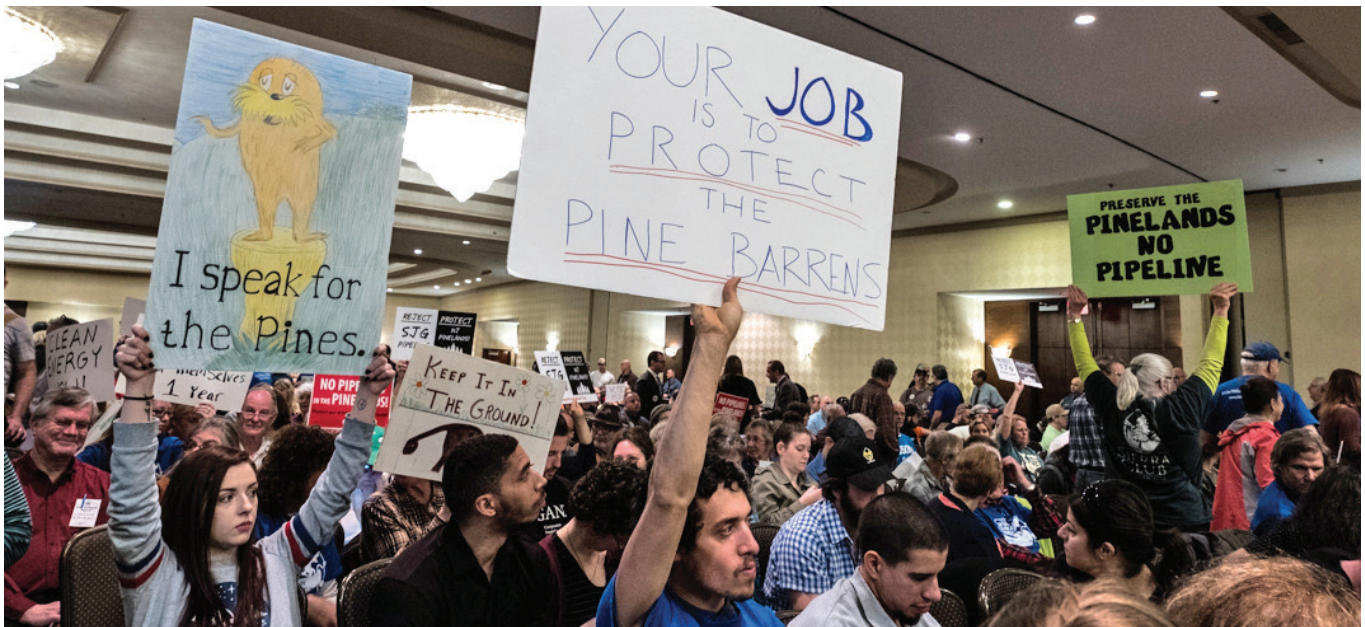
The impacts cascade downward. The Pinelands Commission—already operating with a lean staff—receives part of its budget from the National Park Service, itself destabilized by sweeping cuts. New Jersey's Department of Environmental Protection relies heavily on federal funding. As Washington retreats from environmental stewardship, state agencies are forced to tighten their belts and stretch thinning resources even further.

The Moment to Stand Up

We stand with our environmental protectors, our civil servants, and the diverse array of people who are threatened by the state of our union. The scientists, rangers, planners, and public servants who have devoted their careers to protecting our natural heritage are now being swept aside. America's public lands and old-growth forests are not bargaining chips, and they are not for sale.

This is a moment that demands resolve. Call your representatives. Tell your congressional representatives that these changes are unacceptable and fight back with us. Let's show the nation what the Pinelands can do.

Scan the QR code to find your representatives.



Your voice matters. Call your representatives and demand better for the Pinelands and beyond. Photo by Sarah Puleo.



Northern Pine snakes are threatened in New Jersey. Photo by Robert Ferguson II

Federal Government

Expectations: *In 1978, Congress created the Pinelands National Reserve, the country's first Reserve. As provided in the federal law, Governor Brendan T. Byrne established the Pinelands Commission, and a Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP) was prepared and approved by U.S. Secretary of the Interior Cecil D. Andrus on January 16, 1981. The federal government's primary roles in the Pinelands protection effort are to provide a representative on the Commission, to finance public land acquisition, and to monitor the implementation of the CMP. At a minimum, the federal government should enforce federal environmental laws, vote responsibly on actions before the Commission, support the CMP, and provide the necessary funding for land acquisition through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF).*

Undermined the Endangered Species Act

The Trump administration, through executive order and regulation, is jeopardizing the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The ESA requires federal agencies to ensure that their actions do not push species toward extinction, but fossil fuel projects can now bypass this check. A “Day One” executive order declared a national energy emergency that allows fossil-fuel projects to proceed with minimal oversight. Then, in April, the Department of the Interior proposed a rule that would rescind habitat protection for endangered species. Under this proposal, harming an endangered species would

only be unlawful if someone directly injures or kills an individual animal—even if the overall loss of habitat leads to the species' eventual extinction. This change fundamentally undermines the purpose of the ESA, because habitat loss is the leading cause of species endangerment.

Reversed Course on Renewable Energy

The Trump administration is obstructing clean energy development while promoting fossil fuels. A “Day One” executive order halted federal permitting for offshore and onshore wind energy projects and withdrew over 3.5 million acres from potential offshore wind investment. As a result, New Jersey ultimately called off plans for five nascent offshore wind projects that would have added 7,500 megawatts (MW) of energy by 2035—capacity that could have lowered energy costs and reduced dependence on volatile fossil-fuel markets.

Another “Day One” executive order expanded drilling for oil, natural gas, and coal on federal lands and in federal waters, including the Outer Continental Shelf. These extraction operations have an immediate environmental impact and long-term consequences as their greenhouse gas emissions worsen climate change.

The “One Big Beautiful Bill”—the 2025 budget reconciliation act — further hurt clean energy businesses and consumers. It sharply shortened the window for developers of wind and solar



Inside a Pinelands Commission Meeting

energy projects to qualify for tax credits and abruptly eliminated credits for electric and plug-in-hybrid vehicles, clean heavy-duty trucks and buses, and home solar installations. At the same time, it made mining of “metallurgical coal,” used to produce steel, newly eligible for tax credits.

Hollowed Out Critical Federal Agencies: EPA, Department of Interior, Department of Agriculture, National Parks 🇺🇸

Led initially by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) and accelerated during the October 2025 government shutdown, staff cuts are gutting several federal agencies that are essential to the Alliance’s mission. At the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) alone, roughly one quarter of the agency’s staff had left by mid-2025 — bringing the agency back to the staffing levels it had in its earliest years under the Nixon and Ford administrations. At that time, the agency was still new and operating with a far narrower understanding of environmental threats. Today, with decades of scientific progress and a much broader set of challenges to address, returning to that level of staffing leaves the agency unable to adequately research hazardous chemicals, pursue cases against polluters, or clean up toxic sites.

The National Park Service has eliminated over 1,000 workers, including interpretive rangers, trail maintenance crews, and visitor center workers, while the National Forest Service lost 3,400 positions. The Trump administration is prioritizing staff for timber, mining, and law enforcement.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which has awarded over \$1.2 million in grant funds to the Alliance, faces significant staff disruption. In July, the department announced it would relocate 2,600 Washington-based employees to regional hubs, consolidate offices, and potentially reduce staff further. These cuts threaten the capacity of agencies that manage public lands, protect natural resources, and support environmental research.

Pinelands Commission Funding Has Been Uninterrupted 👍

For its fiscal year 2025 budget, the Pinelands Commission secured over \$390,000 in federal funding. The Commission is also continuing work on its Environmental and Economic Long-Term Monitoring Program, which has been ongoing for 29 years. This program tracks the economic health of the Pinelands region through indicators that include population demographics, real estate, economy, and municipal finance—made possible in part by a \$298,000 grant from the National Park Service. The Commission also received \$92,500 from the U.S. EPA to continue its study of the eastern kingsnake, a species of special concern because it is vulnerable to multiple threats. The study examines the snake’s habitat and life cycle, providing a baseline to evaluate the overall health of the population in the Pinelands.



Aerial View of the Jersey-Atlantic Wind Farm. The Trump administration is preventing similar clean energy projects from developing. Photo credit by Drones Flown



Flooding in Batsto Village from Hurricane Irene – The Climate Superfund Bill would make fossil fuel corporations pay their share for the damages caused by climate change. Image by New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection

State Legislature

Expectations: *The principal function of the State Legislature is to enact laws for the benefit and protection of New Jersey. At a minimum, legislators should not sponsor bills that undermine the intent of the CMP, and at best, will sponsor legislation that protects and enhances environmental richness and diversity in New Jersey and the Pinelands.*

Bill Proposed to Remove Farmland from “Redevelopment” Eligibility 👍

The Local Redevelopment and Housing Law has loopholes that put Pinelands’ farmland and forests in jeopardy. The law was originally designed to speed the revitalization of truly “blighted” areas. However, developers have taken advantage of the law’s broad definition of an “area in need of redevelopment” to instead target forests, farms, and fields to “redevelop” them into housing developments, strip malls, and warehouses. Closing these loopholes is essential to ensure that redevelopment revitalizes truly derelict properties, rather than destroying valuable natural and agricultural lands at risk.

Senate Bill No. 609 would have excluded farmland from the definitions of “redevelopment area” and “rehabilitation area” in the Local Redevelopment and Housing Law. Pinelands Alliance is working to make this good bill better by excluding forests from local redevelopment areas as well. We are collaborating with Senator Latham Tiver, the prime sponsor of the bill, on amendments that also exclude any forested land that has not been

previously disturbed. The bill was not heard in committee last session, but we will continue to work with the bill’s sponsors to try to advance the legislation (now Senate Bill No. 1857) in the new legislative session.

Bill Proposed to Cut Off State Funding for Artificial Turf 👍

The Green Acres Program, administered by the NJDEP, uses taxpayer funds to preserve land and support recreational improvements. Unfortunately, these funds can also be used for projects that install artificial turf.

Artificial turf poses serious risks to both people and wildlife. Artificial turf overheats to asphalt-like temperatures, sheds chemicals and microplastics into waterways, and must be replaced about every decade. With limited recycling options, most of the waste ends up in landfills or illegal dumps. Although greener and more cost-effective alternatives exist, Green Acres still permits funding for this expensive and environmentally harmful turf for playing fields.

Green Acres “disfavors” projects that include artificial turf, but allows applicants to justify them with paperwork. In 2023, this included projects with a combined \$10 million in costs to install or replace synthetic turf playing fields. Together with the Sierra Club, Pinelands Alliance advocated for Senate Bill No. 4941 to prohibit expenditure of Green Acres funds for purchase, use, installation,

or replacement of artificial turf fields. The legislation was not been heard in committee, so the Alliance will continue to advocate for its passage in the new session.

No Action Taken to Advance the Green Amendment

As explained in the opening article to this issue of The State of the Pinelands, the Pinelands Alliance strongly supports the Green Amendment. Amendments to the New Jersey Constitution are proposed by the Legislature through concurrent resolutions. If a proposed amendment passes either a three-fifths vote in both the Senate and Assembly, or a majority vote in both chambers in two consecutive years, it is then put on the general election ballot for voters to decide.

The Green Amendment faced delays in the legislature throughout 2025. Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 43 moved out of the Senate Environment and Energy Committee but stalled in the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee in March 2024. Its companion bill, Assembly Concurrent Resolution No. 119, did not budge after being introduced in January 2024. The Pinelands Alliance will continue to advocate for the Green Amendment to overcome these legislative hurdles. Then, New Jersey voters will be able to make the final decision at the ballot box.

100% Clean Energy Bill Advances

To mitigate the impact of climate change, New Jersey needs to reduce its emissions from electricity production—which accounts for approximately 20% of greenhouse gases emitted by our state. Governor Murphy set a goal of 100% clean energy by 2035, through an executive order. This ambitious goal orders that 100% of electricity sold in New Jersey comes from clean sources, including offshore wind and solar.

Legislation is needed to codify this statutorily and provide more direction to state agencies with the Clean Energy Act (Senate Bill No. 237/Assembly Bill No. 1480). Environmental advocates held multiple rallies at the State House to support these bills, which were discussed in some committees



Severe storms are becoming more common due to climate change. Photo by Justin Curtis

but stalled in others. We will continue urging lawmakers to move this legislation forward so New Jersey can reduce its contribution to climate change, while also gaining the health and cost benefits of clean energy.

Climate Superfund Bill is Stalled

Between 1980 and 2024, New Jersey experienced seventy-five weather and climate disaster events with losses exceeding \$1 billion each. These events included seven droughts, four floods, one freeze event, thirty-two severe storms, thirteen hurricanes, and eighteen winter storms. Taxpayers paid for billions of dollars of repairs through FEMA, state relief, and their personal insurance. The Climate Superfund Bill would make the largest fossil fuel corporations pay their share for the damages caused by climate change in New Jersey. All funds would go to projects that help communities recover from, and become more resilient to, increasingly destructive climate impacts.

In December of 2024, Pinelands Alliance participated in the New Jersey Climate Superfund Act Now Lobby Day to support this groundbreaking legislation. Since then, the bill has moved slowly through the Legislature. In what appears to be a familiar pattern, the bill passed the Senate Environment and Energy Committee, then was referred to and passed the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee on January 8, 2026. Similarly, the Assembly companion advanced out of the Assembly Environment, Natural Resources, and Solid Waste Committee on March 10, 2025, and was referred to the Assembly Commerce, Economic Development, and Agriculture Committee. We will continue to push lawmakers to move this bill forward so New Jersey can better prepare for the climate challenges ahead.



The REAL Rules help to increase coastal resiliency as sea levels rise each year.
Photo by Dennis Abriola

The Governor

Expectations: *The governor should propose and support statewide and regional initiatives that have a positive impact on the Pinelands and its environs. It is imperative that the governor appoint people to the Pinelands Commission who believe in the bedrock environmental mission of the Pinelands. The governor should not use their authority and power to bypass Pinelands protections or make exceptions for special interests.*

Weakened Climate Resilience Rules

In 2020, the NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) made a pact to make New Jersey residents safer, with the introduction of its Protecting Against Climate Threats (PACT) initiative. The latest component of this initiative—known as the REAL rules, for Resilient Environments and Landscapes—was introduced in August 2024. This package took aim at the threats posed by rising sea levels by proposing serious changes to how we build and plan along a coastline that is increasingly impacted by climate change.

As the original rules nearly reached completion, complaints from businesses and municipalities prompted Governor Murphy to weaken the rules. The revisions lowered the projected sea-level rise used for planning from 5.1 feet to 4.4 feet by 2100 and reduced elevation requirements for new or substantially improved buildings from 5 feet to 4 feet. While these changes may

represent minor cost savings to builders, they shift significant financial burdens and safety risks onto homeowners who will face greater exposure to future flooding. The revisions also created exemptions from requirements to build at a safe height for certain affordable housing projects by designating them as a “compelling public need”—implying that protection from sea-level rise is a benefit reserved for those with higher incomes.

Exempt projects may still be subject to other mitigation requirements. The modified rules were adopted on January 20, 2026, the last day of Governor Murphy’s administration. It is disappointing on so many levels that we have to spend years fighting for protections, just to have them watered down—literally and figuratively—as climate threats continue to intensify.

Pinelands Commission Appointments:

Years of Inaction to Fill a Vacant Seat

Bob Jackson Nominated

More than two years have passed since the Pinelands Commission lost one of its most respected members, Edward Lloyd. Ed served for nearly 22 years, appointed by Governor McGreevey in 2002, and was a tireless advocate for the environment. Drawing on his expertise in environmental law, he strengthened the CMP’s protections for issues like residential development, stormwater, and solar energy siting. His absence has left a gaping hole in the Commission, and is

emblematic of a broader pattern: governors from both parties have routinely struggled to prioritize Commission appointments, often letting these seats sit vacant.

An icon and champion for the Pinelands, Ed's legacy must live on. Late in 2025, Governor Murphy finally nominated a successor: former Commissioner Robert Jackson. Robert Jackson more than meets that standard. As a former Pinelands Commissioner, Mr. Jackson fought long and hard against the natural gas pipeline proposed over a decade ago. His refusal to compromise the Pinelands' protections ultimately led to his removal by then-Governor Chris Christie and Senate President Steve Sweeney—a testament to his integrity and independence.

Bills Signed to Control Energy Costs and Expand Community Solar 👍

New Jersey residents already pay some of the highest electricity rates in the nation, and bills climbed sharply again last summer. A major driver is the widening gap between supply and demand—especially as energy-hungry data centers expand rapidly. The regional transmission organization that serves New Jersey, PJM, has been blamed for delaying new solar, wind, and battery projects, while also overpaying existing power plants.

Two new laws address these concerns. The first law (P.L. 2025, JR-11) directs the Board of Public Utilities to investigate PJM's pricing model. The second law (A-5463) requires electric public utilities—which serve as PJM's voting members—to file an annual state report on their votes at PJM meetings explaining whether they advance the State's goals of prioritizing affordability, reliability, and sustainability of electricity production, consumption, and conservation.

Additionally, two new laws will expand the Community Solar Program. The laws added 3,000 megawatts of community solar projects, expanding access for 450,000 additional New Jerseyans; and established a transmission-scale energy storage incentive program to achieve New Jersey's goal of 2 gigawatts of energy storage by 2030, improving resiliency.

No roof? No problem!

New Jersey's Community Solar Program is turning warehouse roofs and abandoned Pinelands landfills into solar farms, bringing affordable renewable energy to everyone— yes, that includes YOU!

The benefits of cheap solar shouldn't only be available to those who can afford the up-front cost. Especially if you are a renter or don't own a solar-compatible rooftop, New Jersey has you covered. Subscribers to the Community Solar Program can save 20–40% on their energy bills.

Sign up through the state's website by scanning the QR code below.



Benefits to solar energy is endless! Soybeans thrive under solar panels on an experimental Rutgers farm in Bridgeton, NJ. This is Daniel Ward, Director of Rutgers Agricultural Research and Extension Center.



Piping Plovers live within the Pinelands National Reserve and nest and feed along the shoreline; yet another reason we need coastal resilience to protect their habitat. Photo Credit US Fish and Wildlife Service.

NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP)

Expectations: *The NJDEP is responsible for protecting the state's environmental resources. It does this by developing and enforcing regulations that protect water quality, threatened and endangered species, and air quality; by overseeing state parks and wildlife management areas; by ensuring that there is enough water for both people and environmental needs; and by setting standards for contaminated site cleanup. Since there is significant overlap with Pinelands regulations, it is imperative that the NJDEP develop programs and enforce rules that are protective of the Pinelands.*

REAL Rules Crafted to Increase Coastal Resiliency 👍

Sea level is rising everywhere on our planet, increasing on average by about 9 inches over the last century. However, New Jersey is experiencing this change at roughly twice that rate. That's because, in addition to rising oceans, our land is gradually sinking. This combination makes New Jersey a 'hot spot' for sea level rise. Our state must lead the charge for climate action, lest it become the canary in the coal mine of climate peril. If the world continues on an intermediate-emissions scenario (meaning we do *some* of the right things, but slowly and unevenly), New Jersey is projected to see another 2.2-3.8 feet of sea-level rise by the year 2100. This places many New Jersey residents in the direct path of harm from coastal flooding. Considering this reality, we need to build differently.

New Jersey was the first state in the nation to initiate a comprehensive approach to address the effects of climate change, including the Resilient Environments and Landscapes (REAL) rules. The original rules proposed in 2024 would have required new structures in tidal flood areas to be built 5 feet higher. However, following vociferous opposition from developers and municipalities, and using new data from the New Jersey Climate Change Resource Center at Rutgers, the governor directed NJDEP to lower the requirement by one foot. Despite this change, four feet is still a significant improvement to protect the lives and property of New Jersey residents. NJDEP adopted the final rules on January 20, 2026.

State Funds Still Being Used on Artificial Turf 🙄

The Green Acres Program, administered by the NJDEP, uses taxpayer funds to preserve land and support recreational improvements. Unfortunately, these funds can also be used for projects that install artificial turf.

In the most recent round of Green Acres awards, at least six projects received funding for artificial turf fields, totaling roughly \$4 million. While the program officially states that it "disfavors" artificial turf, it still allows such projects as long as applicants justify their decision through a public engagement process. Proposals must also include a *Synthetic Turf Field Addendum*, which requires applicants to explain how they will address key

concerns associated with turf fields, including stormwater impacts, microplastic pollution, extreme heat, and end-of-life disposal of the materials, which must be replaced every decade.

However, applicants' discussion of "alternatives" often relies on outdated assumptions about natural grass and rarely considers modern hybrid systems or improved drainage designs. Instead, many simply repeat marketing claims from the artificial turf industry without critically evaluating them. Even though natural grass fields have a much lower total cost of ownership over 20 years, even after accounting for higher annual maintenance, towns are effectively shifting the much higher cost of artificial turf onto the state government. If Green Acres continues to subsidize these bad choices, New Jersey taxpayers will be on the hook for a growing portfolio of bad investments, while our open spaces are invaded by plastic and rubber.

Successful Roll-Out of the Wharton Map



The State Park Service has begun effectively implementing the new motorized-access map for Wharton State Forest—the largest State Forest in New Jersey and the core of the Pinelands National Reserve. However, much more needs to be done, specifically in enforcement.

In recent years, illegal off-road vehicles created substantial damage to wildlife habitat, trails, and historic resources. In response, the Park Service implemented a formal map to show where motor



Damage from illegal off-road vehicles (ORVs) in Wharton State Forest. The Wharton Map helps to prevent damage like this in the Pinelands.

vehicles are permitted to travel in the forest and where only walking, biking, or horseback riding is permitted. This new map closely resembles the first map of the forest, created in 1966 by the first Wharton Superintendent, reaffirming long-standing protections for the land.

However, what should be a straightforward conservation measure has become a statewide political flashpoint. The topic became a major point of contention in the 2025 gubernatorial race. We anticipate that the incoming administration will continue to build upon the success of the Wharton Map.



Forest Floor by Jordan Marsh



Pinelands Commission

With the help of Pinelands Alliance, our partners, and the Pinelands Commission, Black Run Preserve will be preserved for future generations.

Expectations: *A Commission whose members, although of diverse viewpoints, have a shared commitment to the purposes of the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP), the courage to debate tough issues at meetings, and a respect for public process.*

By statute, the Pinelands Commission has fifteen commissioners who make up the governing body of the agency: seven appointed by the Governor; one appointed by each of the seven Pinelands counties; and one person appointed by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior. The gubernatorial appointees are subject to the review and consent of the New Jersey Senate. Members of the Commission serve staggered three-year terms. The commissioners have final say on all activities regulated by the CMP and, through the Executive Director, guide a staff of approximately 40 people.

Took Action to Protect the Headwaters of the Black Run Preserve 👍

When the Pinelands National Reserve was first created, all of the land was broken up into different “management areas” with varying levels of protection. Without the benefit of the knowledge of today, some areas like the Black Run Preserve in Evesham Township were poorly sorted into management areas with less stringent protections. Thanks to an Ecological Integrity Assessment directed by the Pinelands Commission, we now know that areas like the Black Run Preserve have

habitat quality and integrity comparable to core Pinelands Forest and Preservation Areas. This includes rare species, pristine water quality, and the astounding fact that the Watershed itself is over 95% free of development.

Thanks to CMP Amendments adopted by the Pinelands Commission in 2025, an 835-acre property forming the headwaters of the Black Run Watershed has received the long-sought protection of being redesignated as “Pinelands Forest Area”. This effectively down-zones the area, reducing the number of houses and development that can occur. The Pinelands Commission has also taken steps to facilitate the full preservation of the property, by committing \$3 million dollars from the Pinelands Conservation Fund toward an NJDEP Green Acres deal to acquire and preserve the land.

Working on Reforms to Facilitate Accessible Trail Creation 🙌

When Pinelands Alliance teamed up with Pemberton Township to improve an existing trail around Pemberton Lake to make it accessible for people using wheelchairs or walkers—by adding a layer of chemically inert crushed stone to create a stable, level surface—we discovered that the Pinelands Commission interprets its rules in a way that makes this kind of low-impact improvement illegal, even though it poses no harm to surrounding habitats. It ultimately took three years and an expensive variance process to secure approval. The same problem is plaguing a similar

project with Evesham Township for the Black Run Preserve.

These experiences have highlighted the need for reforms to facilitate future accessibility projects. The Commission recognizes that its rules were written for high-impact development, which has the unintended consequence of discouraging accessibility improvements that bring real public benefit. The Commission has announced its intention to amend the Pinelands CMP to remedy this concern, but no proposal has been released yet. The Commission focused its annual Permanent Land Preservation Summit on the theme of “Creating Accessible Trails in the Pinelands Area”. The Policy & Implementation Committee has begun to hash out the details of what CMP amendments for accessible trails would entail at its public meetings, so we are optimistic about amendments forthcoming sometime in 2026.

Pinelands Commissioners Pushing Back Against Artificial Turf 🍷

The Pinelands are renowned for its exceptionally clean water, which makes it all the more troubling that artificial turf remains virtually unregulated within this fragile ecosystem. Even outside sensitive areas, artificial turf brings well-documented problems—extreme heat, plastic waste, and costly disposal. As our understanding of PFAS, polyfluoroalkyl substances called forever chemicals, and microplastic pollution grows, so does concern about how these contaminants may interact with the region’s unique soils, waterways, and rare species.

Although the Commission has approved at least ten different applications with artificial turf over the last decade, several Pinelands Commissioners have become increasingly vocal about the need for change. Even though the Pinelands Commission does not regulate building materials, artificial turf is different, as each field actively sheds at least 200 pounds of microplastics into the environment every year. This was not widely known when artificial turf was first introduced—indeed, it was often marketed as a “green” alternative through industry spin. Today, we know better, including how to design high-use natural grass fields that are both practical and affordable. The Commission’s Policy and Implementation Committee has begun



The Pemberton Lake Trail was updated to be accessible and opened to the public in October of 2025 after a three-year MOA process with the Pinelands Commission.

studying the issue, and we are hopeful that amendments to the Comprehensive Management Plan could be proposed in 2026.

List of Protected Plant Species Remains Outdated 🗨️

The Pinelands CMP specifically prohibits development that would harm endangered or designated rare plants. But when the list guiding this regulation is outdated, the rule becomes hollow, leaving species that meet the intent of the CMP protections completely unguarded. Some plant species that were once abundant are now in decline, while others that were once considered rare are recovering. Yet the Pinelands Commission has been reluctant to update its list of protected plant species, which means that we are protecting an outdated snapshot of ecological risk. It is important that our rules reflect mounting threats from climate change, habitat fragmentation, and unchecked development.

The Pinelands Alliance is a member of the NJ Plant Partnership, which has been coordinating among conservation groups, academic institutions, and governmental agencies to raise awareness about rare plants. We recommend that the Pinelands Commission update the list to reflect the best available science and adopt a mechanism to keep the list current. This can be done with reference to a resource like the NJDEP Natural Heritage Program. Commission staff have included this issue in their work plan for the year, but have yet to hold any formal discussions. Biodiversity is not static, so our protections shouldn’t be either.

Offered High-Quality Educational Programs and Social Media Engagement 🍷

The 2025 Pinelands Speaker Series began with an in-depth seminar on NJDEP's Connecting Habitat Across New Jersey (CHANJ) program. From there, the series expanded into a range of diverse programs, such as a hands-on plein air painting demonstration, as well as an exploration of Lenape culture.

Visit their website at www.nj.gov/pinelands to sign up on their email list so you get information about their 2026 Pinelands Speaker Series.

The Commission also continues to provide high-quality educational opportunities through its annual Pinelands Short Course each March, along with a smaller summer session. On social media, the Commission's Instagram account highlights the beauty of the Pinelands through abundant photos of moths, birds, forest landscapes, and lake vistas—occasionally even featuring the Jersey Devil! Follow their account on Instagram: @njpinelandscommission.

Stay Up-To-Date on Hot Issues at the Pinelands Commission

Pinelands Alliance staff attend all Pinelands Commission meetings—and then summarize to help the public follow the story behind the bureaucracy. We provide context for discussions with long histories and bring in relevant research to explain the science that informs the issues.

Follow our monthly “Policy Notes” blog posts for key highlights and analysis: pinelandsalliance.org/our-work/blog-news



County Government

Sunrise in Black Run by Natalie Sutherland

Expectations: *In New Jersey, county governments provide essential services such as road and bridge maintenance, wastewater planning, recycling, parks and recreation, social services, and other functions. We expect county governments to implement programs and plan for the future in a manner consistent with the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP).*

Committed Open Space Funding for Black Run Preservation 🍷

Burlington County: *The county has stepped in as a major partner in the effort to preserve an 835-acre property forming the headwaters of the Black Run Preserve. The county has committed up to \$5 million dollars from its open-space fund toward an NJDEP Green Acres deal. When combined with the existing 1,300-acre Black Run Preserve, the contiguous parcel will total over 2,000 acres of preserved open space.*



Cedar Swamp by Ann Darlington

Local Government

Expectations: *There are 56 municipalities entirely or partly within the Pinelands National Reserve. The Pinelands Protection Act envisioned that local governments would be primarily responsible for implementing the CMP. While some things are mandatory such as density requirements, municipalities have flexibility with the implementation of resource management goals of the CMP as they revise their land use regulations. The Pinelands Alliance therefore expects municipalities to propose ordinances and master plans consistent with the conservation goals of the CMP.*

Winslow Township Mayor Attempting to Undermine Pinelands Water Protections 🗣️

The aquifer that underlies the Pinelands is protected by critical rules that were established in 2023—but a sand mining company and municipal elected official have been trying to overturn them. Winslow Township Mayor Lawrence has continued her efforts to help Clayton Sand Mine challenge the Pinelands Commission’s authority to regulate large water withdrawals from the Kirkwood-Cohansey Aquifer.

The Pinelands Commission regulates water withdrawals over 50,000 gallons a day and Winslow Township has already reached its sustainable limit. Many development applications are being sent to the Winslow Township planning

board, despite these real resource limitations. Large scale developments, such as tract housing and data centers, cannot proceed unless they can secure a Pinelands Commission water-withdrawal permit. These permits can only be granted when the Aquifer and sub-watershed have enough capacity to meet the demand without risking long-term ecological harm.

If the lawsuit succeeds and restricts the Commission’s power, this authority would shift to NJDEP, whose standards are far less protective and do not account for long-term impacts on fragile wetlands, the base flow of the Great Egg Harbor River, and even local water wells that residents count on.

Evesham Township Residents and Elected Officials Move to Protect Black Run Preserve Headwaters 👍

When the Pinelands Commission makes a change to the CMP, it doesn’t go into effect immediately. When changes are made that impact municipalities, municipal leaders are then given a grace period to decide how to integrate them into their own community plans. Towns can drag their feet for up to a year after the Pinelands Commission amends the Pinelands CMP. Evesham Township residents have been showing up at town meetings over the past year, urging their elected officials to stay ahead of

the curve and be ready to implement protections for the headwaters of the Black Run Preserve as soon as possible. The continued cooperation of Evesham Township officials and residents will be critical to the successful preservation and stewardship of this land in the long-term.

Towns/Counties that passed resolutions supporting the Green Amendment 👍

Across New Jersey, local governments are taking action to strengthen residents' rights to a clean and healthy environment. In recent months, Bordentown, Cherry Hill, Oaklyn, Evesham, and Camden County have each passed resolutions supporting the New Jersey Green Amendment (ACR119, SCR43 Sca (1R)), which would add environmental rights to the state constitution.

The proposed amendment would recognize that every person has a constitutional right to clean air, pure water, and a healthy environment. By elevating environmental protection to the same level as civil liberties, the amendment would empower New Jerseyans and local communities while also requiring government agencies to consider long-term ecological impacts in their decisions.

By passing these resolutions, local leaders are sending a unified message to the State Legislature: environmental health is fundamental to public well-being. As more towns join the movement, New Jersey's Green Amendment continues to gain momentum, community by community, resolution by resolution.



Commissioner Jeffrey Nash from Camden County has adopted supportive resolutions for the Green Amendment.



Data Centers Are Coming - Are Officials Prepared to Evaluate Local Impact?

The post-pandemic warehouse surge is giving way to a boom in data centers driven by rapid AI expansion. In Vineland, Phase 1 of a 2.6-million-square-foot data center is nearing completion, bringing significant water, energy, and transparency concerns.

Water Impacts

Data centers of this size typically consume about one million gallons of water per day, equivalent to the daily water use of 12,000 people. The Vineland facility proposes to use air-cooling, which reduces direct water consumption compared to water-cooled systems. However, this approach shifts environmental impacts elsewhere by substantially increasing electricity demand.

Energy Impacts

Even when located far from population centers, data centers affect everyone. Their enormous energy demand is straining the electric grid and contributing to rising electricity prices as the PJM Interconnection struggles to keep pace. While the Vineland facility plans to eventually supply much of its own electricity, the construction of new fossil-fueled power generation introduces a new set of pollution and climate concerns that extend well beyond city limits.

Lack of Transparency

Within months, the Vineland project quietly expanded from a data center into a full natural gas power plant capable of generating twice as much electricity as the city currently uses. Despite the scale of this change, town officials did not require an environmental impact analysis at any stage. By using the redevelopment loophole (see page 9), projects like this can advance with limited public notice, raising serious questions about oversight and accountability.

Southampton Board of Education Chooses Artificial Turf 🗣️

A special election was held in the spring to approve a bond referendum, in which Southampton Township residents voted to approve important upgrades to their school buildings and to fund a Pre-K program. However, hidden within this package was a plan for a new field, simply described as “Multi-Use Turf,” that did not specify whether it would be artificial or natural turf. Most of the public’s attention was focused on the bigger-ticket items, so the specific risks of artificial turf—such as heat and chemical exposure—may not have been fully understood or reviewed.

Safer, cost-effective alternatives exist—such as professionally designed natural grass fields that can handle high use without toxic exposure or extreme heat. Despite the environmental, health, and fiscal concerns raised by advocates, the Southampton board of education decided to move forward with a contract for an artificial turf field. Worse yet, the field will likely replace an array of

solar panels that are only about halfway through their useful life, and estimated to be producing about \$70,000 in total electricity savings to the school every year.

Towns Partnering with the Alliance to Create Accessible Trails 👍

There are far too few accessible trails in the Pinelands—or anywhere else in New Jersey. Pemberton and Evesham Townships have both partnered with Pinelands Alliance to make existing trails accessible for people using wheelchairs and walkers at Pemberton Lake and the Black Run Preserve. The Pemberton Lake trail is now complete, while the Black Run Trail remains stalled in the Pinelands Commission’s unnecessarily long permitting process. The Alliance is providing staff time and materials such as crushed stone and boardwalk lumber, and on-the-ground support. However, these projects are only possible with the active support of the municipal councils and staff.

Pinelands Legacy Society

Many people who love the Pinelands look to the Alliance to protect this rare treasure forever. To ensure our work continues, they have joined the Pinelands Legacy Society and included the Alliance in their estate plans.

Since our founding over 35 years ago, the Pinelands Alliance has been honored to receive planned gifts. They have come in all forms and sizes, from modest donations that helped us carry out innovative projects and weather challenging economic times to transformational gifts that led to the purchase of the Bishop Farmstead, our home since 2004. More recently, a large bequest from the Herman W. Pagel Estate enabled the acquisition of the Pine Tree Center and launched the Pinelands Research Institute.

Whether named a beneficiary in a will, retirement account, or insurance policy, a planned gift to the Pinelands Alliance makes an enormous difference and has a lasting impact.



Photo by Sara Ascalon



Beautiful views of a Black Run Preserve trail in Evesham, NJ.

Non-Governmental Organizations

Climate Revolution Action Network (CRAN)

One of the brightest spots of the grassroots environmental movement in New Jersey is an organization named CRAN (Climate Revolution Action Network). CRAN is primarily composed of young volunteers who are motivated to identify and implement solutions to the major issues impacting the ecological and environmental health of our state. We have been working with their organizers in depth on the protection of the Black Run Headwaters from development and the effort to persuade Winslow Township to withdraw from a lawsuit attacking the ability of the Pinelands Commission to regulate large-scale water withdrawals from the Kirkwood Cohansey aquifer.

What sets CRAN apart is its commitment to on-the-ground organizing—mobilizing residents, building public pressure, and generating the political power needed to create change. Rather than working quietly within bureaucracies or behind closed doors in Trenton, CRAN shows up loudly and visibly in the town halls where decisions are made. Outspoken advocates, unafraid and uncowed by political retribution, are necessary to build the world we want to live in. We hope CRAN continues to grow and remain a powerful partner to Pinelands Alliance and others who are willing to take bold stands for nature and our environment.

Different Ways to Give in 2026

Some of our most ardent supporters are getting creative to stretch their charitable dollars! Tried and true methods include gifts of stock, donations from IRA accounts, and grants through Donor Advised Funds.

If you are considering such a gift to the Alliance, here's some vital information to have on hand: Federal Tax ID number is 52-1641512 and for stock gifts, our broker is Charles Schwab, DTC 0164, Account 83989526.

To explore these and other ways to support our work, please contact Kellie Westervelt, *Director of Philanthropy* by phone at 609-859-8860 ext. 124 or by email at Kellie@pinelandsalliance.org

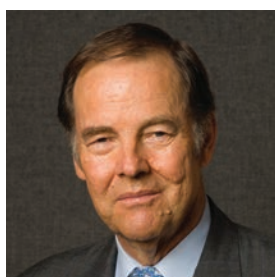
Together, we can find creative ways to protect the Pinelands now and in the future.



Standing Above the Rest. Photo by Gregory Fischer.

Individuals Who Made a Difference

The Pine Barrens Hall of Fame recognizes those individuals who have played a significant role in preserving the natural and cultural resources of the region. We were proud to induct two honorees in 2025, Governor Thomas Kean and author, John McPhee.



Governor Thomas H. Kean

Tom Kean is a hero of Pinelands conservation because he defended the Pinelands Protection Act when he succeeded Brendan Byrne as Governor of New Jersey and has remained a steadfast advocate for the Pinelands and New Jersey's natural resources throughout his long and storied career. Kean served two terms as New Jersey's 48th Governor, from 1982 to 1990, after ten years in the General Assembly. Kean distinguished himself on many fronts, including the ability to work across party lines and with diverse constituencies. He championed environmental causes important to New Jersey, such as the Freshwater Wetlands Protection Act, toxic waste cleanup and land preservation. As Governor, Kean was rated among America's most effective state leaders by *Newsweek* magazine, and he remains the most popular governor in New Jersey's history. In 2002, Kean was named by President George W. Bush to head the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States. The Commission's work culminated on July 22, 2004, with the release of the 9/11 Commission Report. He holds more than 30 honorary degrees and numerous awards from environmental, educational and civil rights organizations.



John McPhee

John McPhee holds a special place in the hearts of those who love the Pine Barrens because he wrote the book *The Pine Barrens* which is a joy to read and had a real impact on the movement to create the Pinelands National Reserve. *The Pine Barrens* was published in 1968 and soon after McPhee became friends with Brendan Byrne, who became New Jersey's governor in 1974. Governor Byrne has said that reading the book and talking with McPhee helped galvanize his determination to save the Pine Barrens, leading to the passage of the Pinelands Protection Act in 1979. McPhee is recognized as an important innovator in journalism as he developed his distinctive style of storytelling grounded in hearing and understanding the individuals who make a place, a profession or an idea interesting. He received the Award in Literature from the Academy of Arts and Letters in 1977, and he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction for *Annals of the Former World* in 1999. He taught writing at Princeton University for forty-five years and in 1982 was awarded Princeton's Woodrow Wilson Award for service to the nation.



**Pinelands
Alliance**

The **Pinelands Alliance** works 365 days a year to protect the land, water, plants and wildlife of New Jersey's Pinelands National Reserve. We have unparalleled expertise in Pinelands laws and regulations. This expertise allows us to engage thousands of people each year in actions to protect the wildest place in New Jersey. These accomplishments are funded by generous donors like you. Here is a small sample of our work in 2025. Learn more at www.PinelandsAlliance.org.

Highlights of Our Work in 2025

Advocacy

The 1,300 acre Black Run Preserve is a beloved natural area in the Pinelands National Reserve. Old zoning rules would have allowed some 778 acres that adjoin the Preserve to be developed, degrading water and habitat quality for generations. For decades, the Alliance has advocated for rule changes to protect this land. We increased our public engagement efforts this year - over 7,000 people signed our petition to protect the Black Run, and hundreds of people spoke out at Pinelands Commission and township meetings. Victory! The Pinelands Commission responded to public pressure and finally implemented new zoning that pared the potential number of homes that can be built from 270 down to 35. Evesham Township now needs to adopt the new zoning. Negotiations are underway to permanently preserve the land without any development.



Science

With the help of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation and a generous bequest, we acquired the Pine Tree Center (PTC) in Tabernacle, NJ, to serve as the home for the new Pinelands Research Institute (PRI). The campus sits on 162 acres of upland and wetland forests; it has buildings for classes, gatherings, and overnight accommodation. The PRI is a science-based field station that is a center for scientists, educators, naturalists and the public to generate knowledge and understanding of the NJ Pine Barrens. In the last year, the PRI has established teaching and research relationships with multiple universities in New Jersey, and these students and faculty are establishing active research programs that address basic research questions and inform the conservation goals and policies of the Pinelands.



Regenerative Farming and Food Justice

Farming to feed our communities is hard work with very tough finances. The Pinelands Alliance organized South Jersey FEAST, a coalition of farmers and nonprofits that came together to create collaborative projects. These projects aim to help farms grow food for their communities while also helping nonprofits bring fresh, local food to all families. As part of this work, the Pinelands Alliance and Rancocas Creek Farm opened a farmers' market at Cooper University Hospital in Camden and supported partners in operating markets in Atlantic City and Burlington. In 2025, Rancocas Creek Farm was able to donate 11,683 lbs of food to soup kitchens, community groups, and the New Jersey Farmers Against Hunger program.





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Top left: Daniel Bossett; Top right: Robert Ferguson II;
Bottom: Christopher Smith

Photo by Jessica Borden



The Pinelands Alliance is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization established in 1989 to protect New Jersey's Pinelands National Reserve.

Our unparalleled expertise in Pinelands laws and regulations allows us to engage thousands of people each year in actions to protect the wildest place in New Jersey.

Using science, education, litigation, and grassroots advocacy, we work to make sure the Pinelands are here for future generations to enjoy.

Our work is possible thanks to generous donations from people like you.

PLEASE DONATE TODAY!

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