

# Conserving Natural Resources in the Highlands Region

## *Important lands threatened by land-use change*

U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Forest Service  
Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry



**Description:** The Highlands region of Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania is an oasis of national significance on the doorstep of an ever-expanding metropolitan area. Spanning 3.5 million acres, the region has abundant privately and publicly owned natural resources that provide quality drinking water, recreation, and economic opportunities to millions of residents and visitors.

The first Highlands Regional Study was completed in 1992 and covered parts of New York and New Jersey. Ten years later, the *New York – New Jersey Highlands Regional Study: 2002 Update* was completed. The Highlands Conservation Act of 2004, PL 108-421, directed the Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, to expand the 2002 update to include the Highlands of Connecticut and Pennsylvania. Much as the previous studies did, the update analyzed the region’s natural resources and the effects of land-use change. The law also authorized Federal assistance for land conservation projects, to assist the Highlands States with acquiring and permanently protecting land or an interest in land from a willing seller.

**Key Issue:** Despite identification of the critical importance of forests to the Highlands region and beyond, vital natural resource benefits continue to be threatened by land-use changes and development.

### **Accomplishments:**

#### ***Study Results:***

- *The Highlands Regional Study: Connecticut and Pennsylvania 2010 Update:* The 2010 update is the third Highlands regional report published by the Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry (NA S&PF). This update follows the original New York-New Jersey study of 1992 and the New York-New Jersey Update of 2002 (<http://na.fs.fed.us/pubs/detail.cfm?id=3610>). The 2010 update contains an assessment of conservation values and an analysis of the current and potential impact on those values. It also identifies regional conservation focal areas and strategies. The Connecticut and Pennsylvania 2010 update is available on line for viewing and printing: <http://na.fs.fed.us/pubs/detail.cfm?id=5238>
- *Online Maps:* Interactive maps from the Highlands Regional Study 2002 and 2010 Updates are available at the Rutgers University Center for Remote Sensing and Spatial Analysis (CRSSA) at: <http://www.crssa.rutgers.edu/projects/hi/>.

#### ***Restoration Projects:***

- *Continuing Conservation Beyond Preservation:* In 2011, NA S&PF invested \$228,000 to develop collaborative Forest Stewardship projects for two of the most important forest tracts in the New Jersey Highlands. The National Forest Foundation matched the seed money.
- *North Jersey District Water Supply Commission:* Also in 2011, NA S&PF invested \$200,000 for a broad-scale Forest Stewardship ecosystem restoration project in the Wanaque Reservoir watershed. The project will aid in maintaining and improving water quality into the future.
- *New Jersey Highlands Restoration Initiative on the South Branch of the Raritan River:* In 2012, NA S&PF invested \$95,000 in Forest Stewardship, Forest Health, and Urban and Community Forestry funds to return unproductive agricultural lands to natural forests unique to the Highlands. The restoration will allow these forests to regenerate, helping to ensure clean, plentiful water and other benefits for 1.5 million New Jersey residents.

**Land Conservation Partnership Projects:**

Each of the four Highlands States submits projects every year, which are then ranked by a seven-member subcommittee of Federal and State partners. Projects must have management objectives that will ensure permanent protection and compatible land uses. Projects must also be located in high conservation-value areas identified in the Highlands Regional Study 2002 and 2010 updates. U.S. Department of the Interior funds are allocated to eligible projects and administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The highest-ranked project receives the majority of the funds. About \$14.2 million in Highlands Conservation Act funds have been appropriated to date, to protect land in the four Highlands States.

**Budget History:**

<b>Highlands Conservation Act Program</b>					
<i>(Dollars in thousands)</i>					
<b>FY2007</b>	<b>FY2008</b>	<b>FY 2009</b>	<b>FY 2010</b>	<b>FY 2011</b>	<b>FY 2012</b>
\$1,971	\$1,723	\$1,450	\$4,000	0	\$4,992

**Future Direction:**

- The U.S. Forest Service will continue to coordinate the evaluation and ranking of land conservation partnership projects until FY 2014, when the Congressional authorization ends.
- If Congress funds the technical assistance section of the Highlands Conservation Act, which authorizes up to \$1 million annually to assist Highlands landowners, the U.S. Forest Service will assist the Highlands States, local units of government, individual landowners, and private organizations in identifying and using Forest Service and other technical and financial assistance programs.

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