

The Highlands Region: Conservation Achievements Since 2002

A Regional Landscape Success Story

The Challenge

The Highlands region of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York, 3.4 million acres of forests, fields, and other natural resources, borders one of the nation's most densely populated areas. Home to 319 communities, the nationally-important Highlands provide drinking water, recreation, and economic opportunity to millions. Effective strategies to manage development and protect priority natural resources are critical to the region. Once lost, ecosystem services and benefits such as maintaining water quality and managing storm water would be difficult—and extremely costly—to replace.

The Solution

The Forest Service has had a pivotal role in helping to conserve the region's resources. Its 2002 NY-NJ Highlands study and its draft 2008 CT-PA Highlands study, completed in concert with other federal, state, local, and nonprofit organizations, identify critical natural resources and recommend conservation strategies that still allow for economic growth. A multi-organizational approach, combined with effective land use policies, such as those that limit sprawl, are key to conserving landscape character, sustaining forest resources, retaining working forests and farms, and providing outdoor recreation.

Resulting Benefits

The Federal Highlands Conservation Act of 2004, PL 108-421 (HCA), authorizes the Forest Service to assist states, local governments, and private landowners with conserving priority natural resources in the Highlands. It also authorizes federal assistance for conservation partnership projects when a Highlands state acquires land or an interest in land from a willing seller for permanent protection.

In 2006, the Forest Service, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, and the four Highlands states jointly developed a regional Land Acquisition Prioritization System (LAPS) to evaluate and rank land conservation projects submitted for HCA funding.

The Highlands regional conservation approach will ensure protection of priority natural resources



View of the Housatonic valley, a scenic corridor in the Connecticut Highlands region..

New York and New Jersey identified the Highlands in their Forest Legacy Program Assessments of Need, qualifying them for Program funds. New Jersey's sole Legacy Area is its Highlands. Program funds helped to protect 2,545 acres in NJ and 515 acres in the NY Highlands since 2002.

New Jersey passed the NJ Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act of 2004, creating a 415,000-acre preservation area and a 444,000-acre planning area. The Act cited the 1992 and 2002 Forest Service Highlands studies as precedents. In 2005, New York updated its Open Space and Recreation Plan, adding Torne Valley, a conservation focal area in the 2002 Highlands study.

State, county, and municipal planning agencies are considering Highlands recommendations in their ordinances and land use planning. Orange County, New York's Open Space and Conservation Plan, and York County, Pennsylvania's Greenways Plan are good examples.

Sharing Success

Significant progress has been made toward conserving the Highlands since 2002, especially in New York and New Jersey. A 2008 Forest Service CT-PA Highlands study will identify new at-risk areas and recommend additional conservation strategies, with the agency continuing to advocate for wise management and protection of the region's natural resources.



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