

PUBLIC COMMENTS SUBMITTED AT HIGHLANDS
COUNCIL MEETING ON MAY 18, 2017

D. Shope 5-18-17

1992 USFS

II. Executive Summary

The Highlands Study Area

The New York/New Jersey Highlands Study Area, 1.1 million acres of Appalachian ridges and valleys stretching from the Hudson to the Delaware River, is a landscape of national significance, rich in natural resources and recreational opportunities. The national significance of the region rests on the following foundations:

- 147,800 acres of public open space hosting eight million recreational visits yearly;
- Quality drinking water for over 3.8 million New York and New Jersey residents;
- Over 500,000 acres of wildlife habitat;
- Integral part of the Maine-Georgia Appalachian chain;
- Historical link to the American Revolution and Civil War.

Still largely consisting of forests and farm fields, the New York/New Jersey Highlands are virtually in the backyard of the Nation's largest metropolitan area. The 31-county New York/New Jersey/Connecticut Region is home to some 20 million people. About one in 12 Americans live within a one- to two-hour drive of the Highlands. 2.8 million live in the nine counties that immediately surround the Highlands Study Area.

The Highlands also offer the last opportunity to provide shape and form to the New York/New Jersey Metropolitan Region, delineating where the pavement ends and nature begin. About 640,000 acres out of the million in the Study Area still serve as an effective greenbelt. If protected, these ridges and valleys will continue to serve as a resource to the metropolitan area, and the entire Appalachian chain.

Land Use Change in the Highlands

The Highlands face the immediate prospect of unprecedented urbanization and change. A Roundtable Briefing Paper prepared in September, 1991, by the Regional Plan Association (RPA) and the National Park Service (NPS), notes that the tri-state area of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut has seen a 60 percent increase in the amount of urban land in the last 25 years, with only a six percent increase in population.

Beginning in the 1980's massive campus-style commercial and industrial development jumped from central areas to heretofore residential suburbs. Nationally, these outlying areas of American metropolitan regions are receiving up to two-thirds of overall new regional job growth.

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- ♦ The economic value of the Highlands timber resource is estimated to be over \$3.2 million. This includes gross income to landowners and the wages of those engaged in harvesting and processing. It does not include the value of the estimated 84,000 cord of fuelwood taken, worth approximately \$8 million dollars.

See maps following page 33.

B. Other Important Resources

1. Agriculture

Although normally considered a "land use" and not a resource, the 16 percent or 160,000 acres of land classified as 'Agriculture' within the Highlands is essential to the area's future. Farms:

- Contain many of the regions vast forest resources; **GROSS**
- Contribute significantly to the Area's economy: over 120 million dollars per year in marketable products;
- Sustain the intrinsic natural character of the working landscape;
- Provide jobs and a sustained quality of life for many landowners and residents of the Highlands. **?**

There are approximately 4000 farms in the nine (9) county area. Less than half or about 1500 are within the Study Area boundaries. Most are in the 10-49 acre size class and located in Warren, Hunterdon, and the very eastern part of Sussex County in New Jersey, and Orange County in New York. Not all farmlands are owned by the farmers. Approximately half are leased.

Farm production is quite varied and includes:

- Livestock and poultry such as cattle, beef cows, milk cows, hogs, sheep, chicken, and broilers;
- Crops such as corn (grain, seed, and silage), soybeans, hay, vegetables, orchards, fruits and nuts, berries, nursery and greenhouse crops, mushrooms and sod.

Farming has been declining in the Highlands since 1970, as exemplified by the land use figures. From 1970 to 1985, agricultural land use went from 17 percent to 16 percent with almost 9,000 acres developed. It is projected that land use will drop to 14 percent by 2010 with another 14,000 acres developed. Clearly, farming in the Highlands is becoming less attractive as development increases.

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The decrease in farming throughout the area is due to a complex set of issues. Some of the more popular notions include:

- World market competition and pricing
- Little or no interest by family members to continue farming
- Excessive regulations
- Development pressure and buy-out offers
- Rising property taxes
- Large capital investments and debt loads with marginal net income.

Both New Jersey and New York have attempted to alleviate the property tax burden with legislation. New Jersey's Farmland Assessment has 26 percent participation and New York's property tax law Section 480-A has only six percent.

In July 1991, New York passed a Farmland Protection Trust Fund. This legislation begins a process to establish a Purchase of Development Rights Program. In New Jersey, the Farmland Preservation Program, which funds farmland easements on a willing seller-willing buyer basis, has been overwhelmingly supported by the voters. Over 70,000 acres have been protected and an additional 23,000 acres are under limited term restrictions. Applications have increased ten-fold and funds are drying up. In 1989, 346 farms applied (38,500 acres), but funding was available for less than half.

While most farmers support farmland assessment and development rights programs on a voluntary basis, there are fears that resource protection tools such as local zoning may lower the value of farmland and subsequent landowner equity.

2. Biological Communities

Biological diversity means the variety of life and its processes. Its distinct and measurable parts include: genetic variation, within and between species; distinct species such as the bog turtle; biological systems such as those found in freshwater marshes; and the variety of systems and their linkages across regional landscapes, such as the Highlands.

Two primary systems, terrestrial and palustrine (freshwater) wetlands, are represented in the Highlands, predominantly in the remaining large blocks of contiguous forests. These natural systems are characterized by a combination of physiognomy (outward appearance), vegetation structure and composition, topography, substrate, and soil moisture and reaction. Within each system can be found a number of communities which are representative of local variability. It is this variability which provides the

Some of the community types found in the Highlands include:

- Glacial bogs
- Hardwood conifer
- Swamps
- Rock outcrop communities
- Chestnut oak forests