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ENVIRONMENTAL CHAIRS MAKE HIGHLANDS LEGISLATION PUBLIC

TRENTON - Senator Bob Smith and Assemblyman John F. McKeon, the two chairs of the legislative environmental committees, today announced that draft legislation to protect the New Jersey Highlands is now available to the general public for review.

"Throughout the process of protecting the Highlands region, we want to foster public participation so that everyone affected has a voice in the discussion," said Senator Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset, the Chairman of the Senate Environment Committee. "The bill that we are making public today is a long way from being a final, polished version, and may or may not be significantly different from the final Highlands protection bill. However, we wanted everyone to have a basis of discussion before our public meeting next week, and in that regard, I think we have achieved that goal."

"The public's input is vital to the process of developing a successful plan to ensure our State's major water supply is safe for generations to come," said Assemblyman McKeon, D-Essex, Chairman of the Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee. "This bill is a working document that, when sent to the full Senate and Assembly, will represent the best possible measure to preserve and protect the Highlands."

The bill, S-1 / A-2635, known as the "Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act," was prompted by concern that New Jersey's Highlands, which provides clean drinking water for over half of the population of New Jersey, is in danger of contamination due to overdevelopment and sprawl.

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Following the recommendations of Governor McGreevey's Highlands Task Force, which consisted of a broad-based group of environmentalists and developers, water conservationists and water purveyors, local officials and State environmental experts, Senator Smith and Assemblyman McKeon put together a joint public hearing schedule on legislation to protect the fragile Highlands water supplies, which they hope to jointly release on April 22nd, Earth Day.

Assemblyman McKeon stressed that any legislation to protect the Highlands must have bipartisan support.

"Protecting the source of drinking water for half of New Jersey's residents is neither Democrat nor Republican," said Assemblyman McKeon. "We hope to move forward in a bipartisan fashion -- with Republican co-sponsorship of this landmark legislation."

According to Senator Smith, overdevelopment in the Highlands area comes with a substantial price-tag -- \$30 billion in water treatment costs alone over the next 50 years, along with the unquantified costs of development and the impact on the quality of life in an overdeveloped region.

"Frankly, we cannot afford the high costs of doing nothing to ensure the environmental security and pristine quality of the Highlands and the water supplied by the Highlands," said Senator Smith. "Inaction is not an option, when you consider the threat that sprawl and overdevelopment pose to the drinking water and the livelihood of 400 million people in the Garden State. We need to ensure that the Highlands will be a viable source of clean drinking water for generations of New Jerseyans to come."

The Senate Environment Committee and the Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee will hold their next joint meeting on Tuesday, March 30 from 7:00 - 9:00 PM at the Skylands Manor in Ringwood Park, Ringwood, NJ, to discuss the bill. Visit the New Jersey Senate Democratic Web site, at www.njsendems.com, for the full Highlands hearing calendar, and directions to the public hearings in the Highlands.

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SEE ATTACHED SUMMARY OF THE HIGHLANDS WATER PROTECTION AND

PLANNING ACT