

News From New Jersey Democrats



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SMITH, McKEON TO BEGIN LEGISLATIVE PROCESS TO PROTECT HIGHLANDS

TRENTON -At a Statehouse news conference today, Senator Bob Smith and Assemblyman John F. McKeon -- the chairs of the two legislative environmental committees -- announced a legislative plan to protect and preserve New Jersey's Highlands, which provides water for more than half of New Jersey's population

The announcement comes on the heels of the Governor's Highlands Task Force report issued over the weekend.

"New Jersey's Highlands are a precious resource to the State, and we must do everything we can to ensure that they aren't tainted by overdevelopment and sprawl," said Senator Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset, the Chairman of the Senate Environment Committee. "New Jersey's future depends on a clean, viable source of drinking water, and if we let unchecked development and industrial pollution ruin the pristine Highlands region, we will have a very dangerous water shortage on our hands."

"We plan to boldly move ahead to preserve the Highlands' valuable water supply in a bipartisan fashion," said Assemblyman McKeon, D-Essex, Chairman of the Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee. "The water supply is neither Democrat nor Republican. All residents will benefit from the protection of the Highlands."

The Highlands region, in the northwestern part of the State, has long been considered one of the most vital water supply areas in New Jersey, yielding almost 400 million gallons of drinking water a day to residents in the northern and central parts of the State. However, recent trends in development and sprawl, and New Jersey's history with water shortages and droughts, have many water conservation advocates calling for greater protections of the Highlands.

"Right now, New Jersey is enjoying the benefits of a number of months of precipitation, but we still need to prepare in the event of a water shortage," said Senator Smith. "In the past

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13 years, the Garden State has seen five droughts, and shortages tend to be cyclical. While our water supplies, reservoirs and aquifers might be fully charged at the moment, we must take steps during the good times to ensure that we are not caught off guard during the next water emergency."

According to Smith and McKeon, the Senate Environment Committee and the Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee will begin holding joint public hearings on March 22 to hear from those affected by Highlands preservation and protection. Three of the hearings will be held in the Highlands to give those who are directly impacted from Highlands regulations a forum to address the committees. At the end of the hearings, on April 22 -- Earth Day -- the two committees will hopefully release their legislative package of bills designed to protect and preserve the Highlands.

While the committee chairs do not know the final form the legislative package will take, Assemblyman McKeon said they will consider a number of the proposals put forth in the Highlands Task Force report and during the public hearings, and produce the best legislative solution for the Highlands.

"Regional planning is the key to preserving the future of the area," said Assemblyman McKeon. "Drinking water for more than four million New Jersey residents will be preserved through a balanced set of tools -- land acquisition, the restriction of development in water conservation areas, and transferring development outside of the fragile Highlands ecosystem."

The two legislators were joined at the news conference by a number of environmentalists, water and land conservation advocates, preservationists and local officials who support the protection of the Highlands, including Jeff Tittel, Executive Director of the New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club, Maureen Duffy, Director of Communications for New Jersey American Water, Mayor Benjamin Spinelli of Chester Township in the Highlands region, and Tom Gilbert, Executive Director of the Highlands Coalition.

"We applaud Senator Smith and Assemblyman McKeon for their commitment to spearhead immediate action on the recommendations of Governor McGreevey's Highlands Task Force," said Mr. Gilbert, who also served on the Task Force. "Their leadership will be critical to implementing these sound recommendations to protect the Highlands region and the water supply for over half the State."

The first public hearing will be held in Trenton to review the Highlands Task Force's recommendations for the region on March 22.

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SEE ATTACHED FOR THE SCHEDULE OF THE JOINT PUBLIC HEARINGS ON
HIGHLANDS PRESERVATION AND PROTECTION

SCHEDULE OF JOINT PUBLIC HEARINGS ON NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS

Monday, March 22 at 10:00 A.M. Committee Room 16, Statehouse Annex, Trenton
-Hearing on Task Force Report

Friday, March 26 Highlands draft legislation available for public
review

Tuesday, March 30 at 7:00 P.M. Skylands Manor, Ringwood Park, Ringwood

Monday, April 12 at 7:00 P.M. Morris County Frelinghuysen Arboretum,
Haggerty Center, Morristown

Thursday, April 15 at 7:00 P.M. Voorhees High School, Lebanon Township

Thursday, April 22 (Earth Day) Committee Room 4, Statehouse Annex, Trenton
at 10:00 A.M.

Visit **www.njsendems.com** for complete directions to the locations of the public hearings.