

For Release: Immediate
Monday, October 15, 2012

Contact: [Senator Smith](#)

SMITH & MCKEON RECIPIENTS OF LEADERSHIP & VISION AWARDS **FROM NJ HIGHLANDS**

(ALLAMUCHY) Senator Bob Smith and Assemblyman John F. McKeon are recipients of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition's (Coalition) first Highlands Leadership and Vision Awards.

The two lawmakers were honored for the leadership and vision that they demonstrated in sponsoring the 2004 Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act, and for their ongoing commitment to its implementation and the long-term protection of the region.

The awards were handed out at the Coalition's annual meeting held recently at the Rutherford Hall in Allamuchy.

"It took extraordinary courage and commitment on the part of Senator Smith and Assemblyman McKeon to sponsor groundbreaking legislation that has helped preserve the Highlands Region, the source of drinking water for more than 60 percent of the state's nearly nine million population," said Julia Somers, the executive director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.

"The Highlands Act was a bold and visionary move that balances sustainable planning and economic growth with environmental protection. It took years of committed effort by many individuals, including Smith and McKeon in the Legislature, to bring this legislation to fruition. The New Jersey Highlands Coalition is pleased to recognize Senator Smith and Assemblyman McKeon with our first Leadership and Vision awards," Somers added.

Signed into law on August 10, 2004, the Highlands Act (A-2635\S1) designated approximately 950,000 acres of exceptional water resource value as the New Jersey Highlands Region.

"We are standing here today on exceptional land in Allamuchy that was saved from a 250-unit townhouse development by the Highlands Act. The historic mansion was restored and is now an elementary school and the offices of the Allamuchy Board of Education and the grounds are a public park," said Senate Environment and Energy Committee Chairman Smith (D-Middlesex\Somerset), after accepting his award from the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.

"The natural resources of the State are public assets that are held in trust for its citizens. As lawmakers, we serve as custodians of the public interest and that presumes our collective responsibility to safeguard precious natural resources like clean, drinking water for the people of New Jersey. While the need to protect the Highlands was long recognized, it took decades to make that a reality. The Highlands Act is a historic measure which does that," Smith added.

"I am deeply humbled by this award from the New Jersey Highlands Coalition and dedicate this honor to the countless heroes in the environmental community and in our state's citizenry, who worked tirelessly for the enactment of the Highlands Act, one of the most significant environmental policies adopted by the State in a generation," McKeon (D-Essex\Morris) said.

"The Highlands Region is one of our state's most pristine areas with exceptional natural resources including critical watersheds, aquifers, and valuable tracts of land. Its continued preservation and protection is key to our survival, our economic vitality and quality of life and especially since New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the nation. I look forward to working collaboratively with advocates and other stakeholders to uphold the threshold of environmental protection in the Highlands, the source of drinking water for an estimated 5.4 million residents of our state," McKeon added.

The New Jersey Highlands is a 1,250 square mile area in the northwest part of the state noted for its scenic beauty and environmental significance, that yields approximately 379 million gallons of water daily.

In addition to freshwater sources, the Highlands Region contains precious natural resources such as contiguous forest lands, wetlands, pristine watersheds and plant and wildlife species habitats. Approximately 110,000 acres of agricultural land are in active production in the Highlands Region which spans 88 municipalities in seven counties: Bergen, Hunterdon, Morris, Passaic, Somerset, Sussex and Warren. It has a population of an estimated 880,000.

The Highlands Act enforces strict development regulation in the Preservation Area under the supervision of the state's Department of Environmental Protection. In the Planning Area, development is regulated by voluntary municipal conformance to a Regional Master Plan that was developed and is implemented by the Highlands Council, a 15-member panel established by the legislation.

Tasked with implementing the Act, the Council adopted a Regional Master Plan in 2008. Currently, it is working with a majority of the Highlands 88 municipalities in planning for sustainable economic development while ensuring natural resource protection.

"Senator Smith and Assemblyman McKeon championed Legislation that established a bold plan for halting sprawl development in the Highlands Region at a time when it was losing 50 square miles per year to development," said Elliott Ruga, senior policy analyst for the NJ Highlands Coalition.

"Today, uncontrolled and piecemeal development has been halted in most areas of the Highlands. We have nine approved plans for center-based sustainable development. To keep these efforts moving forward, our next steps are to find a stable source of Statewide funding for open space, farmland and historic preservation in the Highlands and the establishment of a vigorous market for Highlands Development Credits," Ruga added.

The New Jersey Highlands Coalition is a diverse network of organizations with a mission to protect, restore and enhance the water and other natural resources of New Jersey's Highlands.