

It's Time to Protect Our Highlands' Waters
By State Senator Bob Smith, Senator Bob Martin
And Assemblyman John McKeon

New Jersey is a state of many diverse surroundings. Our state has incredible mountains, farmlands, beaches, towns and cities that all exemplify the various scenes that make up this great country. Our residents all share a common dream of living in a place where there is economic opportunity, good schools, and a healthy environment for families.

The most important environmental issue for our state's future is the protection of our water supply. We have suffered through five droughts in the last 13 years, and droughts tend to be cyclical in nature. It is only a matter of time before the Garden State faces yet another water emergency, and State and local officials have to impose strict water use limitations which are a nuisance to citizens and an economic setback for businesses in New Jersey. We must do what we can to protect the pristine water supplies in our State.

While New Jersey has become largely industrialized, there still exists at the heart of this urban and suburban jungle one of the few remaining vestiges of the wild lands that excited our early settlers, the New Jersey Highlands. The lakes and ponds, capacious reservoirs with expanses of watershed protection lands, runs of forest land serving as habitat for black bear, deer, river otter, and bobcats, and mountainous outcrops and sky-grazing trees in which hawks, owls, and eagles nest offer unparalleled opportunities for hiking, bird watching, fishing, and other naturalist and recreational activities to the millions of residents of the nearby metropolitan areas who come each year to catch a

glimpse of the Highlands' splendor. The New Jersey Highlands Region is recognized as a landscape of special significance by the United States Forest Service and consists of 800,000 acres, or about 1,250 square miles. Statistical studies indicate that the Highlands receive more visitors each year than Yellowstone, Yosemite and the Grand Canyon combined.

However, most importantly, the Highlands yields approximately 415 million gallons of pure water each day and provides drinking water for over half of the residents of New Jersey.

At this time, our State is at a crossroads with respect to the health and well being of current and future residents, specifically the existence of a secure and clean supply of potable water. The State of New Jersey along with private and public water companies have spent hundreds of millions of dollars over the last decades in cleaning up contaminated water supplies and treating water to make it drinkable. As legislators, we must hold the state of our environment paramount and seek a more socially responsible public policy to prevent the contamination of the Highlands water supply. To clean it up after it has been polluted is fiscally irresponsible and simply wrong.

Overdevelopment in this region comes with a substantial price tag -- \$30 billion in water treatment costs alone over the next 50 years if we do not take action now.

Highlands' water is a vital economic link for many water-dependant industries and agriculture. It is the lifeline of our economy. If you enjoy a beverage that requires high

quality waters, or are a person who relies on the many innovative life-saving drugs manufactured in New Jersey, then the Highlands water supply impacts you. And, of course, the lifeblood of tourism is our pristine waterways.

Due to the proximity of the Highlands to rapidly expanding suburban areas, it is at serious risk of being fragmented and consumed by suburban development. Currently, the population of the New Jersey Highlands is growing at a rate 50% faster than the statewide average, with more than 3,000 acres per year being lost to development. The existing land use and environmental regulation system cannot protect the water resources of the New Jersey Highlands against the environmental impacts of sprawl development.

Time is of the essence, and the proposed Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act (S-1, A-2635) is a comprehensive approach to the protection of the water resources of the New Jersey Highlands. The legislation identifies a preservation area of 395,000 acres, of which 79,000 have already been developed. Currently, 145,000 acres remain unprotected, which are critical to the protection of our water supply and that would be subjected to environmental protection, planning, and regulation under the new law.

The Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council will oversee a regional master plan for the preservation area in the New Jersey Highlands. The legislation is mindful of just and fair compensation to those who own property. In addition, watershed aid and state financial assistance will be provided to assure municipalities within the core retain their tax base.

Through a comprehensive bi-partisan effort, we will ensure the protection and preservation of the Highlands and our state's water supply. This is about doing what is right for our future, not about Democrats versus Republicans, not about environmentalists versus developers, not about one region of the state versus another, but about clean water for all of our futures.

Senator Bob Smith is Chairman of the Senate Environment Committee, and along with his colleague, Senator Bob Martin, is the sponsor of Senate Bill No. 1. Assemblyman John McKeon is the Chairman of the Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee and sponsor of A-2635.