



State of New Jersey

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HIGHLANDS REGIONAL MASTER PLAN MONITORING PROGRAM AGRICULTURE & FORESTRY STAKEHOLDER MEETING

DATE: November 13, 2014

TIME: 3:00PM - 4:30PM

LOCATION: County College of Morris
Davidson Rooms
214 Center Grove Road
Randolph, NJ

ATTENDEES:

First Name	Last Name	Organization
Louis	Baduini	Warren County Agriculture Development Board
Bruce M.	Barbour	Warren County Cooperative Extension
Wilma	Frey	NJ Conservation Foundation
Helen	Heinrich	NJ Farm Bureau
Hazel	England	Great Swamp Watershed Association
Gregory	Keller	Morris County Agriculture Development Board
Peter J.	Nitzsche	Morris County Cooperative Extension
Elmer	Platz	NJ Forestry Association
Erica	Van Auken	Highlands Coalition
Ed	Wengryn	NJ Farm Bureau
Kurt	Alstede	NJ Highlands Council – Member
Margaret	Nordstrom	NJ Highlands Council – Staff
Judy	Thornton	NJ Highlands Council – Staff
Keri	Benscoter	NJ Highlands Council – Staff
Corey	Piasecki	NJ Highlands Council – Staff
Courtenay	Mercer	Regional Plan Association
Janani	Shankaran	Regional Plan Association

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MEETING PURPOSE:

To provide an overview of the Highlands Regional Master Plan Monitoring Program and process; brainstorm topics and data availability for ongoing monitoring; identify potential technical advisory committee members; and discuss next steps.

- 1) Introductions
- 2) Overview of Monitoring Program Process
- 3) Discussion Items:
 - a) Thoughts on opportunities for improvement to the RMP.
 - b) How can outreach and education from the Highlands Council be improved?
 - c) What RMP topics/information are most appropriate for ongoing monitoring?
 - d) Do you have access to and/or relevant information about data that can be used for the ongoing monitoring of the RMP?
- 4) Identification of Potential TAC Members
- 5) Wrap up/Next Steps

MEETING SUMMARY:

The meeting opened with welcome remarks by Courtenay Mercer, NJ Director at Regional Plan Association (RPA), the project consultant. Attendees introduced themselves. Ms. Mercer provided background on the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP) Monitoring Program and process. Key points included:

- The RMP is continually updated as new factual information is made available, but the Monitoring Program evaluates progress toward achieving the goals of the RMP by identifying and measuring indicators and milestones.
- Stakeholder meetings are being conducted now to identify potential indicators and data sources that may not be readily available. Public outreach stakeholder meetings to follow.
- Two technical advisory committee (TAC) meetings will take place, one in early 2015 and the second after initial research and analysis has been completed.
- The process will result in the Monitoring Program Recommendations Report (MPRR) and a science and research agenda.

Participants then engaged in discussion, facilitated by Ms. Mercer, about opportunities for improvement within the Highlands RMP and opportunities to enhance outreach by the Highlands Council.

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Participants thought that the Highlands priority agriculture resource areas should better align with county and municipal Agricultural Development Areas (ADAs).

Participants expressed that there are few effective methods for landowners to recover equity. The TDR program has not yet been successful. Meanwhile, municipalities are placing fees for landowners seeking exemptions. One solution is to implement and promote noncontiguous clustering in the Highlands. From the outreach perspective, a periodic engagement component may be helpful in educating farmers about Highlands programs and policies. In the Pinelands, an agriculture advisory committee drawn from farmers and County Agriculture Development Board (CADB) members has been beneficial to local farmers and agency members alike.

Participants relayed concern that property-owners were being delayed and undeservedly charged a review fee by NJDEP for activities permitted under Exemption 7 (Woodland and Forest Management Plans). Highlands Council staff relayed that municipalities have the authority to permit activities that fall under Exemption 7, and they are only aware of one instance where NJDEP issued the approval under the same. In fact, many landowners are not seeking formal approval for activities that fall under Exemption 7. It was agreed that more clarity is needed to better inform landowners, and that the NJDEP application should clearly state that landowners need not apply to NJDEP for activities that fall under Exemption 7.

Participants conveyed that there is a disconnect in engagement and dialogue between the Highlands Council and users of Highlands water who are located outside of the region. As a result, there is no incentive for Highlands water users to conserve or use the water wisely. To instill an understanding of the economic value of water, a user fee or tax could be implemented.

Participants also conveyed that the RMP policies do not sufficiently support woodland owners and woodland management. An easement purchase program could facilitate woodland stewardship.

Participants then discussed agriculture and education opportunities. New Highlands Council members should be educated about agricultural opportunities in the region. New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA) produced a white paper that provides useful background information about the agriculture industry in New Jersey. Meanwhile, farmers should also be more knowledgeable about how RMP policies and programs on agriculture. Ms. Mercer suggested that the Highlands Council could produce a pamphlet in partnership with the NJ Farm Bureau. Beyond this, participants conveyed that the Council should consider hosting more public

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workshops (provided that such efforts have a true value added and deliver information that can be consumed at the public level).

Warren County has a shared arrangement with Rutgers University to employ an extension agent to work on farm business management and advance the county's vision of a food-based economy. Research from this effort could be shared regionally.

Participants conveyed that there should be enhanced understanding of the agriculture industry's impact on the economy. Often, the value of agriculture is calculated in terms of the value of agricultural products sold. However, this does not take into account the impacts of ecotourism: how does agriculture benefit the restaurant industry or the transportation industry? What is the impact in terms of sales tax revenue? The Census of Agriculture data does not factor in ecotourism. In the 1990s, Sussex County discovered that ecotourism, when coupled with historic and cultural tourism, arises as a top industry.

One challenge of ecotourism is transportation. The existing network facilitates travel from the suburbs to New York City and back out, but not necessarily from NYC to the outskirts and back. Ms. Mercer commented that there may be an opportunity to better brand the Highlands region and capture NJ and NYC residents who may otherwise travel to other regions (such as the Catskills) for open space and ecotourism opportunities. Revenues produced from open space programming and initiatives can facilitate private ownership and stewardship of open space.

Participants then discussed forestry, commenting that the RMP lacks sufficient policy and programming on forest stewardship. Most forests in New Jersey are younger than 100 years old. New Jersey does not have an invasive species management plan, and controlling invasives is a huge expense. Further, forest regeneration is hindered because of the overwhelming deer population. More broadly permitting hunting is one solution to control the deer population; however, as land ownership changes, new owners are less likely to allow hunting in privately owned open space. Further, reinstating free market hunting is viewed as politically and socially unpalatable. Members of the public need to understand that deer overpopulation incurs significant environmental impacts – deer kill the forests, and deforestation adversely effects water quality. Wildlife agencies are tasked with managing ecosystem health, yet there is a conflict of interest because many of these agencies are funded by hunting permits. The National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) is beginning to fund forest stewardship planning.

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Ms. Mercer then asked participants to share thoughts on the proposed indicators. Feedback is conveyed below:

- The Highlands Council and RMP should support and promote noncontiguous clustering.
- The shortage of affordable housing is due to large lot zoning in the Highlands region.
- Redevelopment is tied to market trends, which currently favor urban areas and inner-ring suburbs. How can the Highlands capitalize on this trend?
- The research process should address aspects of the RMP that hinder good planning, like impervious cover limits.
- Participants asked if farmers have been able to expand agricultural businesses? To which, Ms. Mercer conveyed that feedback from NJDA suggests that there have been very few agriculture development applications. Participants replied that this is indicative of the cumbersome process.

Additional thoughts regarding indicators were relayed:

- Retail-based agriculture and employment should be monitored. Data from NJ Department of Labor and the Census of Agriculture track harvesters, but not necessarily employees who sell agricultural products or are involved in ecotourism. Ms. Mercer suggested that a proxy could be developed through wage and income tax data from the NJ Department of Labor.
- How many new agriculture businesses have developed? What are major changes in the industry? The National Agriculture Statistics Service (NASS) is a source of data.
- How many landowners have paid farmers to farm on the land in order to maintain a farmland assessment? NASS data does not differentiate whether land is leased by the farmer, or if the farmer is paid by the owner.
- Participants suggested that the project team create a quality of life indicator drawn from multiple variables.

Participants then discussed the challenges of providing housing for multiple generations of farmers. Farmers prefer to utilize their best land for farming, and prefer to cluster buildings (including packing plants and housing units) together. Yet septic, zoning, and other regulations do not necessarily permit this. Facilitating (smart) agriculture development will be crucial to the growth of the industry.

In terms of transportation, participants conveyed that the region's residents have become increasingly discontent with traffic and congestion. Communities in the Highlands region have not resolved the conflict of living in a rural area, yet being

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distant from employment and amenities. Better public transportation systems can help alleviate traffic and congestion. Further, there should be a strategy that addresses how to connect farm workers living in urban areas to farms in rural places.

Participants then discussed farmland and estates. Some farmland properties have been converted to estates and are farms by name, but not by function. The law requires that owners of these estates prove a minimum of \$500 of income from farming sources to maintain the farm tax assessment. One remedy is the estate tax, though many farmers reject this solution because of the difficulties incurred when transferring property to the next generation. It would be good to monitor how many farm transfers go to active farmers versus estates.

As the meeting concluded, Ms. Mercer remarked that participants are encouraged to send further feedback on indicators and data via email and through the online comment portal. Participants are also encouraged to identify potential TAC members. The TACs will meet in two series of meetings, the first set of meetings in January 2015 and the second pending release of NJDEP land use land cover data and associated project team analysis. Interested stakeholders should send resumes.

Over the next few weeks, Highlands Council staff and the project team will be conducting additional stakeholder meetings, meeting with county and municipal staff, and holding public workshops.

Next Steps/Action Items

- Participants should submit via email: additional feedback on indicators, additional feedback on data sources, and TAC member suggestions.
- The project team and Highlands Council staff will follow up with individual participants regarding indicators and data sources.