



State of New Jersey

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 11, 2018

Highlands Council awarded over \$4.5 million for preservation projects

Largest single-year award ever made in federal grant program

CHESTER, N.J. — The New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council (Highlands Council) will be receiving a \$4,675,000 grant from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for preservation projects in the New Jersey Highlands region. This grant represents the largest single-year award ever made through the federal Highlands Conservation Act (HCA) grant program.

“As the most densely populated state in the nation, New Jersey’s natural resources are always at risk. This is especially true in the New Jersey Highlands, even with legislative protections in place,” says Carl Richko, Highlands Council Chairman. “So we are thrilled to have been awarded these funds that will help ensure permanent protections.”

The HCA grant program provides funding for preservation projects in the four-state Federal Highlands region, which includes Pennsylvania, New York and Connecticut, in addition to New Jersey. Eligible properties must be within a “high conservation value area” as defined in the 2002 US Forest Service NY-NJ Highlands Regional Study. Applications are ranked based on a number of factors, with great weight given to water and other natural resources present on the site, as well as potential threat of development. State applicants are required to provide a minimum 50% match for federal funds requested.

In the 2018 funding cycle, the Highlands Council was able to propose projects identified through its Open Space Partnership Funding Program (OSP), which first launched in 2016. The OSP is also a matching grant program, in which the Highlands Council asks its partners to provide a minimum 50% of total project costs. In this way, the Highlands Council was able to use matching funds from its partners to demonstrate match for the HCA request.

“There has been overwhelming interest in our Open Space program from local, county, and nonprofit partners, since the program launched in 2016,” explains Lisa J. Plevin, Highlands Council Executive Director. “We are always looking for possible sources of funding to support these requests. Winning this award is going to help us move forward with a number of very significant projects and ensure additional protection of Highlands resources.”

Since the HCA grant program first began in 2007, New Jersey has been awarded nearly \$14 million for preservation projects in the region. The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection’s Green Acres program led New Jersey’s participation the HCA grant program through 2015, with the Highlands Council taking over in 2016. To date, more than 1,400 acres in the New Jersey Highlands have been permanently protected through HCA funding, with numerous other projects still underway.

Proposed acquisitions through this year’s award include a combination of farmland preservation and open space projects in Hunterdon, Morris, Passaic and Warren Counties. Projects include both fee simple (outright purchases) and conservation easement transactions, in which property owners retain title, while restrictions are placed on a property to prevent certain types of development and other impacts that might degrade or damage resources. Projects approved for funding by USFWS are still pending confirmation of details from local project partners and actions by the Highlands Council. All transactions are anticipated to close within 12 to 24 months.

“We are very appreciative of this significant amount of funding from USFWS that will help us continue our preservation efforts in the New Jersey Highlands region,” says Richko. “We would also like to thank our federal representatives who worked hard to ensure this funding was available. The New Jersey Highlands is the drinking water source for 70% of the state’s residents, so protection of these lands is vital to the entire state.”

The Highlands Council is a regional planning agency, established in 2004 with the passage of the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act, and is charged with implementation of the Act. More information is available at www.nj.gov/njhighlands.

Additional Information:

Highlands Conservation Act Grant Program overview including historical award information:
www.fws.gov/northeast/highlands-conservation-act/grant-process.html

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