

CREATING A FORESTRY AGENDA FOR THE NY – NJ HIGHLANDS

**SUMMARY OF THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES
AND THE POTENTIAL USDA FOREST SERVICE ROLE**

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Introduction

Attached are Regional Plan Association's findings from a series of focus group meetings and one-on-one interviews that were conducted in the Appalachian Highlands of New York and New Jersey in cooperation with the USDA Forest Service.

These meetings were intended to help the USDA Forest Service better understand the challenges and opportunities facing three key stakeholder groups in Highlands Region: (1) Natural resource and park managers in the public and private sector; (2) Land use planners and consultants from state and local government and private industry; and (3) Developers and builders. Forty-five stakeholders were asked to identify the challenges and opportunities facing the Highlands; the information, technical capacity, and funding to address them; and specific role that the Forest Service could play in providing needed assistance. Note that this was not intended to be a consensus-building exercise among all the parties involved in the Highlands. RPA specifically sought out participation from professionals in the field, rather than advocates from the conservation or development community.

The perspective and interests identified by these individuals are summarized and interpreted by RPA in the pages that follow. Also included in the report is a list of participants in the meetings, the meeting agenda, meeting programs for the two large group meetings, and a description of existing USDA Forest Service cooperative programs that was developed for this project.

While this document will be used by the Forest Service to craft both an overall agenda and/or support a series of discrete projects in the Highlands, it is hoped that it will also be useful to others in their on-going work and responsibilities.

This project was supported by the USDA Forest Service and Regional Plan Association. It was written by Robert Pirani, RPA Director of Environmental Programs, in cooperation with Marcus Phelps, Highlands Coordinator for the USDA Forest Service. Christian Michel of RPA and Brooks Mullahy of the Morris Arboretum helped organize and facilitate the meetings. Special thanks are due to Dr. Angela Cristini and Ramapo College of New Jersey and Carol Rufener and Morris 2000 for hosting focus group meetings in their facilities.

Report Highlights

- ◆ **Respondents Expressed an Interest in Having the USDA Forest Service Play an Active Role in the Highlands.** They all saw a positive role for the Forest Service.
- ◆ **Forest Service Involvement should focus on Forestry and Natural Resource Management in the Context of a Changing Landscape.**
- ◆ **Forest Service Activity Should Blend Highlands-Wide Information Gathering and Awareness Campaigns with Specific “On-the-Ground” Projects that build Local and Stakeholder Support.**
- ◆ **Compiling Regional Inventories on the Highlands is Desired by both Public and Private Decision-Makers.** All stakeholders, including many developers, support projects associated with land acquisition and early identification of conservation priorities. Potential Forest Service projects could include an assessment of forest resources and water quality across the entire Highlands.
- ◆ **There is a Need to Convene Stakeholders at a Variety of Scales and Issues, Especially Across Political Boundaries.** The Forest Service could conduct forums on issues ranging from land acquisition and park management to interstate water quality. It could create partnerships to guide decision-making in smaller watersheds.
- ◆ **Developers and Planners are Frustrated by a Lack of Good Information and Professional Capacity at the Local Level.** Potential projects include pilot “carrying-capacity” analyses on issues such as local water supply and stormwater/non-point source management to publication of best management practices for retaining forest cover and alternatives to large lot zoning.
- ◆ **Implementing Ecosystem-Based Management Strategies Requires Better Technical Information, Political Support for Public Land Managers, and Incentives for Private Landowners.** Potential projects include the development and dissemination of a model management plan for a specific forest/park and an education program to reform and expand use of forest tax assessment laws.

Creating a Forestry Agenda for the NY – NJ Highlands

The goals of the Forest Service in the New York – New Jersey Highlands should be to:

- ◆ Help Maintain and Manage Forested Landscapes Recognizing Values Ranging from Production to Preservation;
- ◆ Minimize Forest Fragmentation, Parcelization, and Conversion;
- ◆ Promote Better Management of Water Resources;
- ◆ Protect Biodiversity and Habitat Values; and
- ◆ Create Opportunities for Recreation and Public Access.

These goals can be met by combining Highlands-wide and project-specific education, planning, and stewardship efforts. As detailed in the pages that follow, the Forest Service should undertake initiatives to increase awareness of natural resource values, help coordinate state and local decision-making, and provide better and more consistent information across the entire Highland region. These region-wide objectives could be accomplished in part through an update of the 1992 Highlands Regional Study. Another way to characterize this effort is as a special multi-state, focused revision of the state Forest Resource Plans. This regional assessment should be combined with specific on-the-ground projects to acquire fee-simple property or easements, assist local land use planners, and improve stewardship of public and private lands in the Highlands. These action-oriented efforts can solve immediate resource management issues, demonstrate Forest Service capability and the importance of ecosystem-based approaches, and help build a constituency for future federal involvement in the Highlands. In creating all of these programs, the Forest Service should:

- ◆ Involve the Public in Highlands Management Issues
- ◆ Improve Regional Coordination
- ◆ Encourage Decision Making Based on Long Term Goals
- ◆ Respect Private Property Rights
- ◆ Improve Stewardship of Private Lands
- ◆ Help Inform Decision-making by Providing Sound Fiscal, Planning and Scientific Knowledge
- ◆ Help Provide Certainty in the Development Process
- ◆ Build on the Strong Partnership between the Forest Service and the State Foresters

Challenges and Opportunities	Needed Information, Technical Capacity, Financial Assistance and/or Other Resources	Forest Service Role: Specific Tasks that should be Undertaken	Other Entities Specific Tasks that should be Undertaken	Notes
Educating Stakeholders about Highlands Resource Values/Create Political Will to Conserve Resources	Communication and Public Education about the Highlands	Create Forums to Educate a Variety of Stakeholders Create Educational Materials and Program for the Region, including a “Road Show”	State Foresters and NGOs: Identify participants State Foresters and NGOs: Review Draft Material	Target Audiences include Natural Resource Professionals, Local Communities, Planning Boards, Local, State, Federal Policy Makers, Landowners, Media Use Existing Environmental Educational Centers in the Highlands as resource and distribution network.
Creating a Highlands Identity/Promoting Public Recognition of the Highlands at National and Regional Level	Official Recognition as a National Priority Educational/Promotional Materials about the Highlands	Forest Service Recognition of the Highlands as a National/Agency Priority Create a Marketing Campaign and Materials including a Video, Brochure, Website, Unique Highlands Signage for Parks, Trails, Roadways		This could be done in the context of an expanded/revised regional assessment.

• Other Federal Agencies, State Foresters, Other State Agencies, Local Government, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

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Improving Regional and Interstate Planning and Coordination	Better and Consistent Information at Regional Scale	Create a Regional Clearinghouse for Information	All: Peer Review of Materials. Provide Network for Distribution	See specific examples in next section
Model Programs for Inter-Governmental Coordination.		Develop and Publicize Models/Pilot Programs for Inter-Municipal/Regional/Watershed/Interstate Coordination and Service Sharing.	All: Identify potential host communities and pilot projects	Model programs could target a specific planning decision or be a general forum that promotes coordination across a specific geographic region They require strong goals to be effective. Key issue is creation of clean water standards that are consistent between states. Small watersheds provide best size for forums. Great Swamp “Ten Town Committee” and Rockaway River Cabinet provide two models of a resource-based forum. Select a permanent entity as the convenor for the forum.

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<p>Providing Better and more Consistent Information on Highlands Resources for Decision-Makers</p>	<p>Resource Inventories</p>	<p>Inventory/Evaluate Forest/Habitat/Water Resources such as intermittent streams and wetlands; age/class/stand of timber</p> <p>Inventory and Develop GIS for Real Property Data</p>	<p>All: Provide Existing Data Sets. Review Data Collection Goals and Protocols</p> <p>Local Gov & State Real Property Offices: Provide Land Ownership Data</p>	<p>Data should allow for evaluation of specific areas/properties relative to the Highlands as a whole e.g. What is valuable and what is not. Make things less ambiguous and anecdotal.</p>
<p>Information Management System for the Highlands</p>	<p>Create a Clearinghouse for Highlands Data and a Toolbox for Local Officials Seeking to Access Information</p>	<p>Counties: Database creation and management should involve counties</p>	<p>Clearinghouse Function would include establishing Common Format. Subjects would be “Layer Cake” of resources per “Design with Nature”.</p>	
<p>Landscape Assessment of Highlands Region(s)</p>	<p>Develop Assessment of Highlands Landscape as a Whole or on an Area Basis</p>	<p>State Agencies: Provide Existing Datasets and Protocols. Review Data Collection Goals and Protocols</p>	<p>Assessment should show where growth could go/How much land is left for either conservation or development (In some parts of the Highlands there is a limited amount of land in play)</p>	
<p>“Carrying Capacity” Analyses of the Highlands for Specific Resources/Uses</p>	<p>Sponsor/Conduct Studies on water quality, water quantity, septic capacity, air quality, watershed management</p>	<p>All: Review Criteria for Establishing Thresholds</p>	<p>Scale of studies depends on resource. These should be pilot studies that could provide a model for other places in the Highlands.</p>	

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<p>Providing Better and more Consistent Information on Highlands Resources for Decision-Makers (Con't)</p>	<p>Technical Guidelines for Best Management Practices</p>	<p>Sponsor/Prepare/Distribute Guidelines for Habitat, Forest Retention, Water Quality, Riparian Buffers, Visual Impact, Water Treatment Infrastructure, Septic System Management</p>	<p>State Agencies and NGOs: Review Draft materials. Provide Outlets for Distribution</p> <p>In some cases, good information already exists. What is needed is distribution/education campaign.</p>
<p>Acquiring Land for Conservation Purposes/Compensating Private Landowners for Conservation of Natural Resources</p>	<p>Financial Assistance for Land/Easement Acquisition</p>	<p>Provide Funding through Forest Legacy or Land and Water Conservation Fund for Purchase of Easements</p>	<p>NRCS: Conservation Reserve Program may also be able to provide easement</p>
<p>Prioritization of Lands for Acquisition</p>	<p>Compile/Evaluate Natural Resource Information Relative to Public Acquisition/Conservation.</p> <p>Create Forum for Public and Private Partners to Review Conservation Strategies</p>	<p>All: Provide Data on Existing Land Ownership Status. Coordinate Land Owner Contacts</p>	<p>Many lists already exist. For the most part, sites are listed due to opportunity and political pressure rather than a comprehensive resource assessment. New York State has developed State Land Conservation Plan. NYC DEP has specific criteria. New Jersey has list of priority parcels in Highlands for Legacy and fee-simple acquisition. Non-Profits also have target lists.</p>

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Improving Land Use Planning Practices	Incorporation of Forestry Objectives in Land Use Planning Practices	Assess Impacts and Mitigation Strategies for Forest Cover Loss at Regional and Local Level	State Agencies: Modify New Jersey State Plan and State/federal Clean Water Action Plans. Local Gov: Incorporate Forest Values into Local Land Use Planning including Forest Cover Retention Program.	
Rewards for Municipalities that Protect Regional Resources/Create Centers	Rewards for Municipalities that Protect Regional Resources/Create Centers	Conduct Pilot Planning Studies in Individual Towns	State Agencies: Modify New Jersey State Plan	There are several "Smart Growth" initiatives in New York State that may provide assistance
Mitigation of Fiscal Impacts of Conservation	Mitigation of Fiscal Impacts of Conservation	Make Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) on USDA Conservation Properties. Survey Revenue Sharing Approaches Provide Forum to help Coordinate/Rationalize How and Where PILT's are Employed.	State and Local: Assess Potential for Revenue Sharing/Greater Regional Equity Between Municipalities State and Local Park Owners: Make Payments in Lieu of Taxes on Conservation Properties	
Mitigation of Land Disturbance Activities	Mitigation of Land Disturbance Activities	Provide Technical Assistance to NRCS Soil Erosion Program	NRCS and EPA: Coordinate and Improve Ability to Deliver Information under this Program.	NJ Chapter 251 Program Requires a Soil Erosion Plan and Certification for any site > 5,000 sf. This requirement is tied to general stormwater permit.

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Improving Land Use Planning Practices (con't)	Better Open Space Elements in Local Comprehensive/Master Plans	Provide Financial and Technical Assistance for Creating/Revising Local Open Space Elements of Comprehensive/Master Plans	Local Gov: Initiate Revisions	Review plans especially in terms of references to Park buffer areas, trail linkages, cluster development set-asides, State and Local Open Space \$. New York State DEC has developed Local Open Space Planning guidebook. Hudson River Valley Greenway may provide model.
Stronger Role for Local Environmental Commissions in Land Use Decisions	Sponsor Forum to Assess Role of Local Environmental Commissions	Local: Identify Participants	ANJEC and Association of County and Local Environmental Management Councils are supporting organization for these local bodies	
Trail Linkages between Parks and Forests e.g. Highlands Trail	Conduct Study examining Feasibility of Creating Trails in the Highlands	All: Identify Existing and Planned Trail Corridors	NPS River and Trail Assistance Program is Active in the Highlands. Other regional trail efforts	
Effective Alternatives to Large Lot Zoning	Conduct/Sponsor Review of Incentives/Disincentives, and Alternatives to Large Lot Zoning	Local and NGOs: Provide Information on Existing Zoning	The analysis should include issues related to sewage treatment; clustering, placing building envelopes in the large lot, approval predictability	
Education and Training Programs for Local Planning Officials	Conduct/Sponsor Educational Opportunities for Planning Officials	Local and NGOs: Identify Participants and Issues		

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<p>Providing Better Information on Management Issues and Practices on Public and Private Lands</p>	<p>Research and Disseminate Information on Forest Ecosystem Management</p>	<p>Conduct/Sponsor New Research on Maintenance Practices, Invasives, Wildlife/Deer.</p>	<p>State: Provide data on species and habitat.</p>	
		<p>Disseminate Existing Information on Fragmentation and Deer Management Issues</p>	<p>All: Provide Outlets for Distribution</p>	
		<p>Assess Costs of Implementing Best Management/Maintenance Practices</p>	<p>State Foresters/Park Agencies and Local Gov: Provide Cost Data</p>	
<p>Promote Forest Practices that Protect Water Resources</p>		<p>Develop and Disseminate Information on Headwater Areas, Riparian Corridors, Drinking Water Supplies, Phosphorus-Reduction Offsets, and Soil Erosion.</p>	<p>State and NGOs: Review Draft Material</p>	<p>NYC DEP is developing information on drinking water protection, phosphorus offsets and other programs. NYS DEC and DEP are creating Model Forest in Putnam County</p>
<p>Meeting Long Term Maintenance and Staffing Needs for Public Lands</p>	<p>Documentation of Maintenance Needs</p>	<p>Assess Management and Maintenance Needs, Especially Links between Management Goals and Maintenance Expenditures</p>	<p>State and Local Forest Management Agencies: Create a Model Management Plan for Forested Tracts</p>	<p>Example is the Unit Management Plans created by New York State in the Catskills. Specific Issues are Compacted Soil and Hazardous Trees. Assess issues in State Parks Especially.</p>
<p>Financial Assistance for Adequate Staffing</p>	<p>Financial Assistance for Adequate Staffing</p>		<p>State Park/Forest Management Agencies: Provide Adequate Funding</p>	

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<p>Promoting Good Stewardship and Protecting Landowner Equity in Private Forest Lands</p>	<p>Better Management Options for Private Landowners</p> <p>Sponsor Cost Share Projects for Forest Management, Riparian Corridor, and Ecosystem Restoration</p>	<p>Create Model Public/Private Partnership for Forest Land Management</p>	<p>State Foresters: Incorporate Model Management Programs</p>	<p>Program Must Recognize Private Property Rights</p>
<p>Improve Management of Open Space “Set-Asides” resulting from Subdivision Approvals</p>	<p>Develop Guide and Educational Program for Homeowner Associations/Land Trusts/Landscapers</p>	<p>Local and NGOs: Review Draft Material</p>		
<p>Provide Legal Relief/Protection for Landowners Granting Access to Private Land through Easements or other means</p>	<p>Develop Model Easement Language/Program</p>	<p>State: Provide “Access Insurance” or legal protection for landowners that provide access.</p>		

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Promoting Good Stewardship and Protecting Landowner Equity in Private Forest Lands (con't)	Local Timber Harvest Ordinances that are Consistent and Reflect Best Management Practices	Review/Analyze Impacts of Local Timber Harvest Ordinances to Assess Impacts	Local and State Foresters: Provide Copies of Ordinances	
		Develop Model Ordinances	Local and State Foresters: Review Draft Material	
		Undertake Education Campaign for Local Officials, Landowners, Landscapers	All: Provide Outlets for Distribution	
	Soil Mining Practices that Reflect Best Management Practices	Review/Analyze Soil Mining laws and Develop/Disseminate Best Management Practices	State, Local, NGOs: Review Draft Materials and Provide Outlet for Distribution	
	Reduced Property Taxes and other Incentives that Reward Good Stewardship	Conduct Education Campaign for Local Officials and Assessors on Value of Forest Tax Program	Local and State: Add Stewardship Values for Assessment System. Reduce tax burden when land is appropriately managed for timber, water, wildlife, recreation	Must Address Public Misperception of “Wealthy” Landowners not deserving of tax breaks
		Assess Economic Value of Forest Retention	Extend Roll Back Provision	

ATTACHMENTS

MEETING PARTICIPANTS

MEETING AGENDA

MEETING PROGRAM

**DESCRIPTION OF COOPERATIVE PROGRAMS
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