



# Protecting Drinking Water Supply

ISSUE BRIEF SERIES • CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS • GREAT WATERS NEW JERSEY

Millions of people cherish the streams and trails of Northwest New Jersey for fishing, hiking, and memories of the outdoors. Our local economies benefit, too. But the waters and landscapes of the Highlands play a lesser known—but far more critical—role in our families lives: they supply 70% of state residents with clean, affordable drinking water.<sup>(1)</sup> Unfortunately, these waters are poorly protected at their source: the headwater streams, underground springs, and surrounding forests that blanket the Highlands region.

## The cost of unprotected drinking sources

Most New Jersey residents go to their taps expecting water that's clean, affordable, and easy to access. According to the EPA's community water survey, New Jersey has the fourth lowest cost of residential water in the nation. Why? Because the forests of the Highlands act as a natural and cost free filtration system at the water's source. But this resource is as delicate as it is valuable; much of the land that surrounds source waters, in areas surrounding the Musconetcong River, for example, lays over porous bedrock—a feature that if built upon or managed irresponsibly can allow polluted groundwater to seep into essential headwaters, lakes and streams.

Many local protections fall short of caring for this vulnerable system. And state safeguards, the Surface Water Quality Standards issued by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP), only protect the value of drinking water close to intakes that are far downstream of the source. NJDEP also fails to address the danger of contaminated groundwater at these sources.

This lack of protection not only threatens to increase the cost of water treatment across the state, and puts local users of well water—and visitors who come to recreate near source waters—at risk.

*Notes: (1) In 2011, NJGS determined that 70% of the State's population, 6.2 million people, get some or all of their water from the Highlands.*

LEARN MORE ABOUT RELATED ISSUES AT [GREATWATERSNJ.ORG](http://GREATWATERSNJ.ORG)

## Our proposal: Urge the NJDEP to protect Highlands land and source waters for drinking water value

We appreciate that the NJDEP protects Highlands waters based upon their ecological and fisheries significance. However, we note that Surface Water Quality Standards also allow for standards based upon “Water Supply Significance.” We believe that the waters of the Highlands, as defined in the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act qualify. We urge the Department begin a process in 2021 to at minimum, upgrade all Highlands waters to a Category One Anti-degradation Designation to protect this vital role.

Protecting the connection between surface and ground waters is an underlying principle that led to the enactment of the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act. Within the Highlands Act rule, ( N.J.A.C. 7:38-1.1.) it states that it is “consistent with the purposes of the Highlands Act to sustain and maintain the overall ecological values of the ecosystem of the Highlands Region with special reference to surface and ground water quality and supply....” This rule also states that “Where the Department, in consultation with the Highlands Council, determines there is an inconsistency in the standards, the Department shall apply the Regional Master Plan standards.” To close this gap in protections where waters in the Highlands Zone have a lower than necessary quality standard (Category Two), we recommend that all waters in the Highlands Zone should have at least Category One status. There is a precedent for such upgraded protections with the designation of “Pinelands waters.” for South Jersey water supply.

The New Jersey Highlands provide the state and the entire Mid-Atlantic region with an irreplaceable public service. By protecting our drinking water at its source, both on the surface and underground, we can ensure thriving Main Streets, unforgettable outdoor memories, and safe affordable drinking water for generations to come.