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Editorial | Saving our backyard

## **Federal help is needed to protect the vast and beautiful Highlands.**

The Highlands are advertised as "Our Backyard Paradise."

As in Philadelphia's "backyard."

The lush 2 million-acre greenbelt, stretching from Reading, Pa., to the Connecticut-Massachusetts border, lies within an hour's drive of 25 million Americans. The Highlands offer them an accessible refuge from urban life. The area attracts more visitors each year than Yellowstone National Park.

Beyond recreation, Highlands forests, meadows and streams provide homes for remarkable diversity of plants and animals, including 247 threatened or endangered species. They host 70 kinds of migrating songbirds. They purify the water running downstream and underground.

But temptation may foul this garden. Suburban development is creeping ever closer, chewing up 5,000 acres a year as builders pay hard-to-resist premiums for land. Population in 20 Highlands towns has increased more than 20 percent in the last decade and is projected to grow up to 48 percent more under current land- use and zoning laws.

The Highlands are in serious danger of disappearing. They need preservation.

A good starting point is the federal Highlands Stewardship Act, sponsored by Rep. Benjamin A. Gilman (R., N.Y.) and Sen. Jon Corzine (D., N.J.). It wisely empowers private-public partnerships to set aside land without infringing on property rights. It's a common-sense, good-for-the-environment approach that even President Bush can embrace.

Rampant altering of the landscape threatens critical water supplies for some of the nation's largest metropolitan areas, including New York and Philadelphia. More than half of New Jersey's residents rely on the Highlands for drinking water.

When paved surfaces replace meadows and forests, water cannot soak into the ground to replenish aquifers. Rain that runs off roofs, roads and parking lots carries pollution that poisons rivers, lakes and streams.

Only 20 percent of the Highlands are protected from development. A recent study by the U.S. Forest Service concentrating on just the New Jersey-New York portion of the Highlands identified nearly 100,000 acres of sensitive land in

immediate risk of development, with an additional 340,000 acres on the watch list.

The Highlands Stewardship Act aims to replicate deals like the recent preservation of the Musser Scout Reservation in Marlborough Township, Montgomery County. There, two private trusts combined with state and county open-space preservation programs to raise \$2 million to keep the land forever green by purchasing development rights.

But state and local efforts alone cannot save the Highlands. The Highlands Coalition, a conservation group, estimates that \$750 million is needed to preserve critical areas.

That's where the federal government comes in. The stewardship act calls for \$25 million in annual matching funds for 10 years to pay half the cost of conservation projects. This nonregulatory approach stretches local dollars and targets willing sellers, who can continue to own the land by selling only the development rights. It's far from a federal land grab.

An Office of Highlands Preservation would work with the governors of the four states and the federal secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to set yearly preservation priorities. It's a smart venue for regional planning.

The Highlands are a crucial buffer for heavily populated metropolitan areas, a place, in the words of the U.S. Forest Service, "where pavement ends and nature begins."

They are, indeed, the backyard for 1 in 12 Americans. As sprawl comes knocking, here's one "not in my backyard" response for which you can make a solid case.