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A unique plan for preserving the Highlands

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By **CANDY J. COOPER**
STAFF WRITER

The Highlands may never be as famous as the Grand Canyon or the Florida Everglades, but the region could earn a unique designation under a proposal supported by politicians and environmentalists in New Jersey and three other states.

The federal Highlands Stewardship Act would carve out an area across four states within which towns, counties, or private groups could receive federal dollars to purchase undeveloped tracts.

The legislation would be the first of its kind in the country and is tailor-made to help preserve the Highlands, where a patchwork of ownership would make it impossible to create a single national forest or park.

The legislation also is innovative because it seeks to maintain state and local control over the undeveloped properties.

"We're breaking new ground here," said Tom Gilbert, executive director of the Highlands Coalition. "This is really trying to forge a new model for doing landscape-scale conservation where lands tend to be privately owned and more fragmented. It's trying to piece together individual lands into a whole that's greater than the sum of the parts."

Environmentalists hold that the Highlands are suffering death by a thousand cuts. The bleak outlook is propped up by two government reports that predict a near ecological Armageddon if no one intervenes in the development of the 2 million-acre swath of ridges, valleys, forests, and farmland that stretches from Connecticut through New York and New Jersey to Pennsylvania.

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The area provides safe drinking water for more than 11 million people in the four states, and shelters more than 250 imperiled plant and animal species, including rare bobcats, endangered turtles, wild trout, and orchids.

The federal legislation would provide up to \$250 million over 10 years for the purchase of remaining pieces of undeveloped land across the Highlands. It seeks to protect what is now a rumpled bedspread of rolling landscapes, crisscrossed by highways and scattered increasingly with McMansions, shopping malls, hamlets, and mushrooming towns.

The precise boundaries of the stewardship area would be determined by a special advisory committee that would be created by the legislation.

The legislation, co-sponsored by Democratic Sens. Jon S. Corzine and Frank R. Lautenberg and Republican Rep. Rodney P. Frelinghuysen of Harding, is necessary to preserve an area located in the most densely populated region in the country. One-twelfth of the U.S. population lives within a one- to two-hour drive of the Highlands, according to the latest U.S. Forest Service Highlands Regional Study, used as the basis for the legislation.

Under the bill, local entities, whether towns, counties, or non-profits, would be eligible to receive matching funds from the federal government to buy pieces of land from willing sellers. It also would establish an Office of Highlands Stewardship, within the Department of Agriculture, to oversee distribution of those funds.

Although hailed by politicians in the region - it is supported by legislators from all four states - the bill is opposed by builders.

"The notion that people living in houses automatically degrades the water quality and the environment, I reject as untrue," said Stephen Shaw, president of Shaw Built Inc. in Chester and immediate past president of the New Jersey Builders Association. "Otherwise, we should pack up our bags and leave the region or live in caves."

Shaw, who as a representative of the National Builders Association was the lone voice of dissent before a House subcommittee on national parks last month, says he is not in favor of paving over the Highlands. But he fears the plan would further limit New Jersey's housing supply, drive prices even higher, and deplete the stock of affordable homes.

Development in the Highlands, Shaw believes, is occurring at an appropriate rate and requires no government intervention - especially in the form of a new federal office with its attendant bureaucracy. Echoing some House subcommittee members' concerns, Shaw said he did not understand the concept of a stewardship area.

"What does that mean?" he said. "No one seems to know."

Environmentalists and politicians alike point to a model in Sterling Forest State Park in Orange County, N.Y., 18,000 acres once earmarked for 13,000 housing units. That project took 15 years to conserve.

And advocates for the bill use a U.S. Forest Service report as their sword. Published in December, it pointed to a 5,000-acre-a-year march of development across the remaining open spaces of New Jersey, including the ridges of the Highlands.

High growth rates

Some Highlands towns, including Mahwah in Bergen County and Montville in Morris County, grew by 34 percent between 1990 and 2000 - higher than the 13 percent overall growth rate in the state, the report noted.

In 20 to 30 years, new rings of suburbs could creep up over the Highlands, and the population could increase by as much as 50 percent under worst-case scenarios, according to the Forest Service report.

Environmentalists say they fear most for the water supply. Few people imagine that buying a newly constructed home in the Highlands degrades the environment. But Wilma Frey, project director for the Highlands Coalition, said new homes increase areas of impervious surfaces - driveways, roads, roofs, patios, even compacted lawns, where rainwater can no longer percolate deep within the ground.

Groundwater, then, is not recharged, lowering well levels. And ensuing water runoff, containing lawn chemicals and motor oil, can pollute streams and create flooding.

The highest peaks of the Highlands also provide a "flyway" for warblers, tanagers, and grosbeaks on their way from the Southern Hemisphere to parts even farther north.

"If our forests here are gone, these birds are going to be just as dead as if they have no tropical rain forest to go back to in winter," Frey said.

Development also is creating fragmentation of forest areas. As wilderness is sliced into smaller and smaller pieces, animals that need a habitat far from the forest's edge can no longer survive, she said.

As for affordable housing, environmentalists say that's not what builders are banking on.

"Builders are building mega-mansions, mini-mansions, and McMansions, and probably most of them start at \$400,000," Frey said. "They're not interested in low-income housing. Their real motivation is the bottom line, making money. You could even call it greed."

But builder Shaw said local zoning and market demands dictate what is constructed. He added that construction on a five- or 10-acre lot - common zoning in many Highlands towns - will not allow a home that is "anywhere near affordable."

"We are businessmen," Shaw said, "And last time I checked, a business is defined as something that makes money. I'm doing a job and supporting my family, and if that's called greed, then a lot of people would fall into that category."

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