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Pinelands Preservation Alliance Releases Annual State of the Pinelands Report

Pinelands Commission – Reform Is Long Overdue

Today the Pinelands Preservation Alliance (PPA) released its 12th annual *State of the Pinelands Report*. The report focuses on the state of Pinelands preservation and rates how specific actions of government agencies have either helped or harmed the Pinelands during the past twelve months. The report rates the actions of the governor, Pinelands Commission, New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), New Jersey State Legislature, local government, and other governmental agencies.

The survival of the Pinelands ecosystem depends on evenhanded and consistent implementation of the Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP). This plan is the blueprint for conservation and growth across 1.1 million acres of the Pinelands National Reserve.

Unfortunately, the Pinelands Commission, the leading state agency charged with protecting the Pinelands, has made a series of decisions that undermine the CMP, has moved to restrict public comment, and has failed to adopt reforms that the Commission itself found are needed for the long-term health of the Pinelands. It is critical that the Governor appoint conservation minded individuals to the Commission so it can get back to its job of protecting the Pinelands.

The Pinelands Commission has failed to address the growing issue of over-exploitation of the Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer. Despite the findings of their own \$5.5 million study and the results of the 2017 state water supply plan, the Commission has not proposed any proactive measures to date.

"This years' report once again points out the lack of will by the Commission to convert \$5.5 million worth of studies into meaningful actions to protect water resources. The question that needs to be asked at this point is.... are \$5.5 million worth of taxpayer funded studies going to end up on a shelf never to be used in any meaningful way," stated Richard Bizub, Director for Water Programs for PPA.

This past year the Commission also failed to address serious concerns about two major sand mining expansion projects. The rare species surveys required by both projects have flawed

methodology and critical northern pine snake habitat is threatened by this expansion. Two of the worst decisions in the Commission's history, its approval of the South Jersey Gas and New Jersey Natural Gas pipelines, took place in 2017 and are still under review in the court of appeals. But the Commission did nothing in 2018 to adopt and clarify procedures for deciding such major infrastructure cases or to protect the Pinelands from future proposals that are sure to use these two pipelines as precedent.

Despite a number of environmental setbacks, some good initiatives and outcomes came about this past year. The Commission renewed its efforts to protect rare plants that find a home on the nearly 11,000 acres of roadsides in the Pinelands. They also released a science report detailing the vulnerability of natural and excavated ponds in the Pinelands. The Commission's annual Pinelands Short Course continues to provide a wonderful opportunity for people to learn more about unique natural, historic, and cultural aspects of the Pine Barrens.

This past year the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) formally adopted a plan to set a "maximum contaminant limit" for perfluorononanoic acid (PFNA) which was used in stain repellants, textile coatings and fire-fighting foam and is linked to cancer in humans. New Jersey became the first state to regulate this chemical. DEP also made progress in reducing the damage caused by off-road vehicles on state lands. Finally, the DEP denied a massive development application for the Heritage Minerals site in Manchester Township, Ocean County scoring a victory for the Pinelands and Barnegat Bay.

This year's report also recognizes the great work of the state legislature to pass prescribed burn legislation. The New Jersey Prescribed Burning Act will allow more prescribed burning including ecological burns and allow organizations to get insurance coverage for prescribed burns. The state legislature also made progress that would allow the establishment of stormwater utilities to fund stormwater management. Rain runoff has long been considered a serious water pollution problem and should this legislation pass it would be a huge win for improving water quality.

The report notes some important progress made by the Governor. We commend his appointment of Carl Richko to the New Jersey Highlands Council. We look forward to similar actions for the Pinelands Commission. The Governor also took the important step of re-entering New Jersey into the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative and laid out a plan for New Jersey to reach 100% clean energy by 2050 with the creation of the 2019 Energy Master Plan.

The Pinelands Preservation Alliance pays tribute in this report to one of New Jersey's greatest environmental leaders, Governor Brendan T. Byrne, who passed away in January 2018 at the age of 93. Brendan Byrne was truly the father of the Pinelands. After signing the Pinelands Protection Act in 1979, he never stopped advocating for the Pinelands in the face of all the challenges and threats he saw over the ensuing years. If not for Governor Byrne's decision to make protecting the Pinelands one of his primary goals in public life, it is certain we would have lost the vast open spaces found here today. Development would have carved it up, fragmented the forest, polluted the water and driven out much or all of the cranberry farms.

With the passing of Governor Byrne, the legacy of the Pinelands rests in the hands of the Pinelands Commission and Governor Murphy. The Pinelands Commissioners and staff have the

authority and ability to move the agency from one of inaction and poor decisions to progress and following its regulations.

“Those who care about the Pinelands are looking to Governor Murphy to help get the agency back on track and restore its credibility as the principal guardian of the Pinelands’ unique natural and scenic treasures. This includes appointing conservation minded individuals to the Commission, and taking action on the Southern Reliability Link pipeline that is beginning construction by New Jersey Natural Gas. This report highlights the urgency of moving forward now,” says Carleton Montgomery, Executive Director of Pinelands Preservation Alliance.

The 2018 State of the Pinelands Report is available online at www.PinelandsAlliance.org. A full-color copy of the report can be obtained by visiting the Alliance at its headquarters located at 17 Pemberton Rd, Southampton NJ 08088. For more information, please call 609-859-8860.

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The Pinelands Preservation Alliance (PPA) was established as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization in 1989 by environmental leaders and Pinelands residents, with the goal of preserving and protecting the more than 1 million acres of the New Jersey Pinelands. PPA remains the only private organization dedicated solely to environmental protection throughout the Pinelands.

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