



NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS COALITION

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PRESS RELEASE

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When: Immediate

What: Governor gives excellence award to environmentally destructive plan

The Murphy Administration announced the winners of its 25th Annual Governor's Environmental Excellence award on 12/10/24. Among the recipients was Merrill Creek Reservoir for "*a Forest Stewardship Plan to manage wildlife habitat and implement conservation projects to improve forest habitat.*" This positive sounding accomplishment is an extremely destructive commercial (for-profit) logging project along the Merrill Creek Reservoir, which planned to clear at least 65 acres of protective forestland.

A February 2024 op-ed in lehigvalleylive.com¹ described concerns on the part of local residents and advocates regarding the elimination of forest protections from this project:

Tree removal, particularly large trees, is a well-known contributor to flooding. For this reason, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection prohibits vegetation removal in riparian buffers within flood hazard areas. However, an exception exists for commercial logging. This means logging falls under "agricultural use" and bypasses flood hazard area regulation.

Recently, Merrill Creek implemented a plan to harvest timber around the reservoir. Logging poses numerous threats to water quality. Run-off from logged areas can cause erosion, washing mud and silt into sensitive trout production streams. This deprives fish and amphibians of oxygen and pollutes drinking water sources for the entire region.

Other well-documented problems with water quality caused by logging include:

Large releases of nitrate (NO₃-) from watershed soils and a concurrent release of inorganic monomeric aluminum, which is toxic to some aquatic

biota including brook trout and important macroinvertebrates.¹

Reduced filtration of pollutants from the surrounding landscape. Forest protection is widely recognized as an important strategy to maintain clean water, reduce the cost of purification and reduce stormwater capital costs.¹ In addition, the cost of retaining forests is virtually zero.

Logging also has extremely detrimental effects on many bird and other animal species, by depriving them of habitat and is in direct conflict with New Jersey climate change policy as described in the NJ Global Warming Response Act, to significantly increase carbon sequestration from land sources.

Nevertheless, Governor Murphy and his Department of Environmental Protection saw fit to applaud this logging project with this “Environmental Excellence” award.

We recognize that the Merrill Creek property is privately owned and that the owners have the right to harvest timber for profit. But to recognize the FSP as an example of environmental excellence ignores its adverse impacts to water quality and to the State's climate resiliency goals while rendering the value of the award as nil.

The New Jersey Highlands Coalition and New Jersey Forest Watch call upon Governor Murphy and his NJDEP to align such awards with their stated policies for protecting the environment and addressing climate change and reconsider their values that led to rewarding environmental destruction.

¹ https://www.lehighvalleylive.com/opinion/2024/02/delaware-rivers-flood-history-should-give-pause-to-logging-at-merrill-creek-opinion.html?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

¹ Effects of Forest Harvesting on Ecosystem Health in the Headwaters of the New York City Water Supply, Catskill Mountains, New York, <https://pubs.usgs.gov/sir/2008/5057/SIR2008-5057.pdf>

¹ Open Space Institute, Protecting Forests for Clean Water, <https://www.openspaceinstitute.org/research/protectingforests-clean-water>

