



# ANJEC REPORT

Local Environment Matters

AUTUMN 2025

## Inside:

- Special section – Celebrating the NJ Pinelands
- Artificial turf – The grass is always greener over the crumb rubber, but not so healthy
- Getting youth involved



*ANJEC  
Executive  
Director  
Jennifer Coffey*  
Photo by Taylor McFarland

## Director's Report

# We're in it for the long haul

"Is this where we are?" my sister Janis asked me while we were on a long, hot walk on the Wildwood boardwalk looking for our favorite candy shop. She meant to ask if we'd found our destination when we encountered a lovely young woman offering samples. I replied, "This is where we are, but it's not where we're going." (It wasn't the right store). These days, I feel like we did on that sweaty summer trek.

It seems like every day there is something bad, horrifying or depressing in the news about the environment. Where we are is in the throes of a marathon. The daily onslaught of news about rollbacks and dismantled programs can trigger panic reactions until we move on to the next issue to panic about – cancelled funding, reversals of laws that protect the air we breathe, the water we drink, the open spaces in which we grow our food and find respite for our mind and soul. Amidst the devastation, we must remember we are in a marathon, maybe an ultra-marathon, not a sprint.

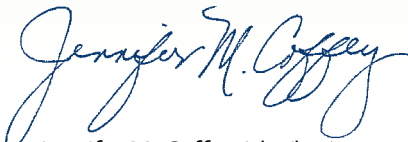
I have been an environmental advocate since I was about four years old (that's a story for another time), and I've been working in the environmental and community health policy/advocacy space in nonprofit organizations for more than twenty years. I've had wonderful mentors and learned much along the way. The most important lesson I've learned is that we need you, and me, and all of us to be in this fight. To prevail, we need you to avoid burnout. Here are my best tips:

- 1. Panic and get angry:** (joking/not joking) When something bad happens, it's okay to get mad. We're human. We have emotions. So, feel them. Don't wallow in the panic too long – use your emotions as motivation to make a difference.
- 2. Get and stay focused:** Identify the areas of influence you have. How can you build more sway with your locally elected officials? The school board? Local businesses? What are the issues where you can make a difference locally? Shade trees? Stormwater? Native plants? Finding solutions to local issues will build a stronger reputation for your Environmental Commission (EC). It will attract more talented volunteers. Start small. Celebrate your wins (in the press, on social media, with a ribbon cutting, with photos on your municipal website and at community tabling events). Start creating your 2026 goals list now.
- 3. Join forces:** Keep an eye out for opportunities to take action on the bigger regional, state, national and global (think climate crisis) issues. ANJEC hosts regular Zoom sessions under the umbrella "Hour of Action" where we identify one action on one statewide issue where EC members can make a difference. The big issues – changing land use regulations to reduce the impacts of flooding; ending the climate crisis; eliminating forever chemicals from our drinking water – can be daunting for an EC to tackle alone.


The good news is, you're not alone. ANJEC is here as your resource for issues in

your municipality and also to guide and amplify local action from the 5,000+ individual volunteers serving on 300+ ECs across the great State of New Jersey. Local action collectively results in statewide changes and impacts. That model has worked for 50+ years and gave NJ the nation's first wetlands protection law, the first hazardous contaminated site remediation policies and the nation's most effective plastic pollution reduction law.

Your actions in your community matter. They have been the backbone of New Jersey's national environmental leadership. Rest when you need to. Delegate when you can. Rejoice in local wins to feed your soul. Call us at ANJEC for support. Do not quit. You matter and we need you and appreciate you.



Jennifer M. Coffey (she/her)  
Executive Director



**ANJEC**REPORT  
Local Environment Matters

Library Subscription  
\$18.00  
ISSN 1538-0742

Vol. 45 / No. 4      AUTUMN 2025

**564 MUNICIPALITIES ..... ONE ENVIRONMENT**

Executive Director ..... Jennifer M. Coffey  
Editor ..... Julie Lange Groth

The mission of ANJEC is to promote local action to protect and restore New Jersey's natural resources and to ensure healthy communities for today and the future. ANJEC advances its mission by engaging in equitable and inclusive practices through leadership, partnerships, education, advocacy for strong public policy, and in support of environmental commissions, public officials, and communities throughout New Jersey.

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On the cover: *Cranberries in a burlap sack.*  
Photo by Fred Herzog



# Back to grass

By **Taylor McFarland**, Conservation Program Manager,  
Sierra Club, NJ Chapter

**A**s towns continue to discuss the maintenance of their playing fields and the possibility of replacing the natural grass with artificial turf, it's helpful to understand the real impact this choice might have on the community and those who play on it. While it may seem convenient at first, remember that artificial turf isn't as harmless or as low maintenance as some might think. In fact, regularly playing on artificial turf can raise serious health concerns, environmental problems and unexpected costs.

A standard-sized artificial turf field contains about 40,000 pounds of plastic, and it loses 0.5 percent to 8 percent of its blades each year. This means roughly 200-3200 lbs. of plastic waste could enter our environment, impacting our air, soil, waterways and oceans.

Microplastics from artificial turf can be inhaled or swallowed accidentally by both people and animals, which could lead to health issues. These plastic blades contain chemicals like PFAS, which are known to be harmful to our health and environment. These substances have been linked to various health problems, such as cancer, immune system issues, thyroid problems and heart disease.

*Regularly playing on artificial turf can raise serious health concerns, environmental problems and unexpected costs.*

## The heat is on

One of the most concerning issues with artificial turf is the extreme heat it generates. On warm days, synthetic turf tends to heat up more than natural grass, making the surface very hot and amplifying the heat island effect. Surface temperatures can reach 158°F on a day when the air temperature is 96°F. This increased heat can cause heat-related illnesses, melted shoes, blisters, dehydration or heatstroke. As climate change worsens, these risks will only increase, affecting athletes and anyone enjoying sports on artificial turf. Natural grass, on the other hand, provides a safe and cooler surface that promotes health instead of threatening it.

For high school athletes, the increasing temperatures lead to more heat-related illnesses, injuries, hospitalizations and even deaths. Heat stroke is the third leading cause of sudden death among high school athletes, behind cardiac arrest and traumatic brain injuries. Since 1982, 67 high school athletes in the US have died from exertional heat illness, according to the National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research. Of these deaths, 52 percent occurred in August during pre-season, and 94 percent were football linemen.





## Life is fleeting

On average, a synthetic turf field lasts about eight to 10 years. When it's time to replace it, thousands of pounds of infill and plastic carpet must be carefully removed and disposed of. Unfortunately, mixed plastic waste from synthetic turf can't be recycled normally and often ends up in landfills, where it remains for hundreds of years. Sometimes, turf is improperly dumped outside of landfills, which is concerning because it can leak microplastics, heavy metals, PFAS and other harmful chemicals into our environment, along with greenhouse gases.

Because a "playable" artificial turf field typically only lasts up to 10 years, its long-term costs are much higher than natural grass. Over 20 years, an artificial turf field could cost \$4.2 million more than a natural grass field. Maintenance includes cleaning, debris removal, sanitation, disinfection, infill replenishment, grooming and hazard monitoring. Instead, towns aiming to improve their natural grass fields should invest in proper maintenance and upgrades, which could save schools and communities millions of dollars.


Artificial turf proposals are abounding in New Jersey, including a plan to build 14 new artificial turf fields at Thomas Edison State Park, owned by the National Park Service. This is a huge project, but what is worse is that the park already has plenty of fields.

Development of artificial turf is happening in unsuitable areas, such as the Village of Ridgewood, where an artificial turf field is proposed on the historic Schedler property. Besides the environmental and health concerns, artificial turf is completely

inappropriate for a historical site that is also dealing with major contamination.

School districts considering artificial turf while facing budget cuts should consider maintaining their natural grass fields, like Ritzer Field in Maplewood, instead of spending millions on artificial turf, which could lead to more debt.

So, what can we do? We can educate others about the harms of artificial turf, compare costs and advocate for change. It's essential to engage decision-makers, such as school board members, city councilors, mayors and school administrators. Supporting moratoriums or bans at the local or state level is also a crucial step.

Ultimately, we need to invest in safe, healthy playing fields for everyone. New Jersey needs to go back to grass. 

### More info

Study: Artificial Turf Versus Natural Grass: A Case Study of Environmental Effects, Health Risks, Safety, and Cost – [www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/17/14/6292](http://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/17/14/6292)

Beyond Plastics – <https://www.beyondplastics.org/fact-sheets/synthetic-turf>

Sierra Club – <https://www.sierraclub.org/new-jersey/zero-waste>

## Thanks to ANJEC member communities

We are grateful to the thousands of volunteers serving as local officials in more than 300 municipalities and counties that are members of ANJEC. These dedicated people – from municipal and regional environmental commissions and green teams to open space committees, planning boards, governing bodies, shade tree commissions and zoning boards – dedicate their time and efforts to assure a clean environment and high quality of life in their communities throughout our State. Thank you! 



# Acting Locally

By **N. Dini Checko**, ANJEC Project Manager; **Jennie Aylward**, ANJEC Volunteer; **Michele Gaynor**, ANJEC Resource Center; **Cheryl Reardon**, ANJEC Project Director; and **Sheila Baker Gujral**, ANJEC Resource Center Director

## Plastic dust: the invisible threat lurking in construction

Our built environment relies heavily on plastics – vinyl siding, PVC pipes, paint, flooring – and this dependence has real environmental and health consequences. Globally, building and construction is the second highest-use sector for plastics behind packaging, accounting for 17 percent of total plastic production.

Traditional materials like wood, stone and concrete are quickly being replaced by composite plastic products such as AZEK and Trex. These alternatives are popular because they're low maintenance, but they come at a hidden cost. When cut, drilled or sanded, these materials shed clouds of microplastic dust – tiny particles that can be inhaled by workers, contaminate soil and storm drains and pollute pools, gardens and waterways.

Sherri Lilienfeld, a chemical engineer and member of Sustainable Margate, was among the first in NJ to connect the dots. She noticed that what looked like “white snow” around construction sites was actually plastic dust, a contaminant that needed to be contained. Lilienfeld pushed for an ordinance to address this unexpected pollution, making Margate the first municipality in the country to require contractors to control microplastic dust.

The Margate ordinance prohibits contractors from blowing debris or plastic particles into streets or storm drains. It requires simple, affordable precautions: tarps, saw hoods and vacuum attachments to capture

plastic sawdust. For a one-time investment of about \$500 in reusable equipment, contractors reduce cleanup costs and protect their own health, too, Lilienfeld explained.

Brian Thompson of the Monmouth Beach Environmental Commission and Beyond Plastics saw the value of Margate's ordinance and quickly championed similar measures in his town. In about one year, 16 New Jersey towns have adopted microplastic dust ordinances, creating a wave of local action to protect both workers and the environment. With leadership from Thompson, a growing coalition of advocates is now helping towns pass these simple, cost-effective protections.

Local governments, contractors and residents all have a role to play. The solutions are easy, affordable and proven. We can stop microplastics at the source before they wash into our waters, enter our lungs or harm our ecosystems.

### Resources

- Bilingual flyers, equipment guides, FAQs, model ordinances and other resources are available at [bit.ly/constructiondust](https://bit.ly/constructiondust).
- “How New Jersey's towns are tackling microplastic pollution from construction” – <https://tinyurl.com/mvjbs4zj>
- “Buildings' Hidden Plastic Problem” – <https://tinyurl.com/3wnzeb23>

– N. Dini Checko

## Hoboken embraces students' flooding solution

Just before graduating this spring, three Hoboken High School students completed an environmental resiliency project that they started as freshmen, after Hurricane Ida caused catastrophic flooding in their city in 2021. For their project, called H<sub>2</sub>Oboken, they designed and tested miniature garden kits to absorb the heavy rains that are increasingly common in a warming world.

Students Rowan Ellison, Zoe Magaletta, Ian Crespi and Linder were excited when H<sub>2</sub>Oboken won the 2021-22 #NJSTEMTogether Communities Challenge for high schoolers who design solutions for community problems. But they didn't have funds for implementation until the City of Hoboken awarded them a \$5,000 Youth Climate Action Fund grant in 2024, after Ellison graduated. Magaletta, Crespi and Linder set out to turn their idea into reality.

The team learned to jump through unexpected bureaucratic hoops and taught themselves how to run a media campaign. They procured containers, soil and native seeds for 248 kits and distributed them to Hoboken residents on request. The modular rain gardens are now growing on "rooftops, windowsills, fire escapes, anywhere," Linder reported, noting that "a wonderful thing about this project is it can be done in virtually any urban environment."

The students emphasized that political will and large amounts of funding are needed to address Hoboken's vulnerability to flooding, but they are grateful that the city gave them the means to contribute to the solution.

"The H<sub>2</sub>Oboken project, porous concrete around town, resiliency parks – it all comes



*Zoe Magaletta, Ian Crespi and Linder display the H<sub>2</sub>Oboken garden kit components.* Photo credit: Jennie Aylward

together," said Crespi, citing some of Hoboken's water control projects. "It's an opportunity that I feel like goes overlooked in so many communities. If just a few more students in high school or middle school would be able to put forth their projects and find funding for them, I think that we could be in a much better place than we are now."

Magaletta advised anyone pursuing local climate change solutions to look for "allies in your community that you don't know exist."

"Talk to people, make those connections and network," she said. "Be confident in your mission. If you want to help people, that's going to show." – Jennie Aylward

## Morristown eats for impact

Lifelong Morristown resident Raizzi Stein, 25, wanted to build a more healthy and sustainable food system in her community by creating better access and options for healthy foods while supporting local restaurants and businesses. By choosing to incorporate more plant-based (but not highly processed) foods into every-day eating, diners can help reduce climate damage.



*By choosing to incorporate more plant-based foods into everyday eating, diners can help reduce climate damage.*



Stein took her ideas to local restaurants, focusing on community wellbeing, local and plant-based eating, and helping the environment. As the organizer of this initiative, Stein was able to get 10 Morristown restaurants to introduce several new plant-based meals on their menus. Patrons offered their reviews afterwards and, overwhelmingly, they were excited to have these more sustainable, healthy options available in their local restaurants.

Morristown Mayor Timothy P. Dougherty presented a certificate to Stein recognizing the positive results from her “Eat for Impact” efforts and for enhancing environmental stewardship in her community. Some significant findings from the initiative included:

- 1,190 climate friendly meals served
- \$39,616 in local sales
- 124,619 in-person and digital impressions
- 1,890,900 pounds of greenhouse gas emissions saved
- 32,732,800 gallons of water saved
- 93 acres of land saved.

### More information

According to a study by researchers at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Health and Brigham and Women’s Hospital (<https://tinyurl.com/2t9w6p97>), red and processed meat had the highest environmental impact out of all food groups in participants’ diets, producing the greatest share of greenhouse gas emissions and requiring the most irrigation water, cropland and fertilizer.

If you are interested in getting involved with Eat For Impact in your town, visit [www.eatforimpact.org/](http://www.eatforimpact.org/).

Learn more ways how communities lower their environmental impact through food system changes: [www.plantedociety.org/](http://www.plantedociety.org/).

– Michele Gaynor

## Hitting4Habitat – A home run for biodiversity

For Francesca Mundrick, the inaugural Hitting4Habitat (H4H) Baseball/Softball Tournament at Alcyon Park in Pitman was a home run. Mundrick coordinates community outreach on Pitman’s Environmental Commission (EC) and also serves on ANJEC’s Emerging Leaders Committee. This spring players from the Pitman Little League (ages 6 to 8) swung their bats, hit balls, and ran bases, all for a great collaborative cause.

Mundrick was looking for a way to engage the youths and adults who use those fields in protecting local biodiversity. With a \$1,500 ANJEC Open Space Stewardship grant funded by the LSRPA Foundation, she created Hitting4Habitat in partnership with Pitman Little League, Pitman Parks and Recreation and several local businesses.

“The Hitting4Habitat Tournament is a sports-for-nature concept where participating baseball and softball teams play to boost biodiversity in their local communities,” explains Mundrick. “This program fosters partnerships between the Environmental Commission, Parks & Rec Departments, Little League and other municipal agencies and organizations.”

The H4H Tournament supported biodiversity in two ways:

- Volunteers installed biodiverse community garden spaces at recreational ball fields in the municipality.
- Participating players were encouraged to be environmental stewards by planting native plants at their homes.

The H4H Tournament aimed to create



### Scenes from Hitting4Habitat

positive associations between sporting events, a popular cultural activity, and environmental protection initiatives.

On the big day, Mundrick welcomed the teams and shared information on biodiversity. Each player received a H4H T-shirt plus seeds for a large native garden, provided by Pinelands Nursery and Pinelands Direct, along with information on supporting biodiversity at home. To sweeten the pot, Impact Landscapes, LLC donated five trees to recognize five home runs by The Bombers (the winning team). The trees were planted at the park and watered by the Pitman Fire Company.

Now that the inaugural H4H Tournament has concluded, all the tournament players can compete for a \$500 Dick's Sporting Goods Gift Card by planting their packet of seeds and caring for it over the summer, either at home or at the H4H Community Garden located behind the baseball fields. The winner (to be an-

nounced on August 25) will be the player who has shown the greatest care and stewardship for their native plant garden. Mundrick has trademarked the Hitting4Habitat program and welcomes other municipalities to give it a try. She can be reached at [mundrickf@gmail.com](mailto:mundrickf@gmail.com).

– Cheryl Reardon

## Creative zoning in Cherry Hill

Cherry Hill is a suburb of Philadelphia with almost 80,000 residents in 24 square miles. In 1931, there were 82 farms in Cherry Hill. Now there is only one working farm left, Springdale Farm, which is operated by the third generation of the Jarvis family. They have been in business for over 75 years, and they have won the Camden County Historical Society's Historic Preservation Award. There is a long history of farming in Cherry Hill, so creating

a legal environment that supports that remaining farm was a priority for town leadership.

"The goal is to provide the property owners with as much flexibility as possible, so they'd have incentive to keep their places going," said Cherry Hill Mayor Dave Fleisher in a *TimesDaily* article. In 2024, the township purchased the 23-acre Holly Ravine Farm and preserved it as open space, after a public outcry when a developer proposed to convert it into a senior housing facility. At that point, they adopted the Agriculture-Horticulture Commercial Overlay Zone and updated the zoning map. In 2025, they updated that ordinance to include additional parcels (<https://tinyurl.com/tzruyxst>).

While the overlay does not change the zoning from residential/institutional to agricultural, the overlay adds an "agricultural designation which formalizes the farming and growing already flourishing" at those locations. This allows them to apply for farmland preservation funding, whereby New Jersey's Farmland Preservation Program would pay them to give up development rights on their land in exchange for permanently maintaining the parcel for agricultural use.

This recent development added 250 acres of preserved open space to Cherry

Hill, for a grand total of 1,642 acres of open space (10.7 percent of the municipality's land).

It all comes back to how you plan. As stated in Cherry Hill's Open Space and Recreation Plan (2025), "Springdale Farm provides a look back in history to the agrarian roots of the Township and a look into the future as more communities begin to embrace local agriculture to support environmental sustainability."

– Sheila Baker Gujral

## Mount Olive EC fends off anti-NJPACT REAL Rules resolution

Climate change is happening. We are living through it here in New Jersey. The New Jersey coastline is sinking. Torrential storms are becoming more frequent and increasingly dangerous. You live here. You know.

In an effort to get ahead of these dangerous and life-threatening developments, and to protect the residents and businesses in New Jersey, the Department of Environmental Protection has proposed the NJPACT REAL rules (*ANJEC Report* page 30) The goal is to incorporate current climate science into land use regulations so



*There is an 83 percent chance that sea level will rise at least 5 feet by the year 2100.*



that we can plan for the climate we will have in the years ahead. These rules would adjust coastal flood hazard areas, create an inundation risk zone, encourage nature-based solutions, improve water quality, reduce flooding and more.

On May 27, the Mount Olive Township Council considered Resolution 239-2025, which called for the township to officially oppose the NJPACT REAL Rules. Environmental Commissioner Irene Sargonis attended the meeting and encouraged further research before passing the resolution.

"The resolution is factually incorrect," Sargonis said. "I understand it's a template that you used from perhaps another town, but just because it comes in a neat and tidy template does not mean it's correct."

Included in her comments was a statement from ANJEC Executive Director Jennifer Coffey: "The facts of the resolution are plainly wrong. There is an 83 percent chance that with minimum impacts of climate change we will see the sea level rise by five feet by the year 2100. There's a 17 percent chance, given moderate greenhouse gas emission scenarios, that we will exceed five feet of sea level rise by 2100.

**Pro tip for environmental commissioners**

Check your governing body's agenda regularly. You won't always be given a heads up about pending items that impact the environment. Stay vigilant and speak up.

The moderate emission scenario requires significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions below today's emissions, and we are not on track for that. I would argue that we should start to look at the extreme impact scenarios, which are nine feet of sea level rise." The resolution did not pass.

Kudos to the Mount Olive Environmental Commission and Irene Sargonis for their vigilance and commitment to science over politics. Only one person spoke out against this ordinance, but that voice was heard and made a difference.

**Further reading:**

- "Mount Olive Council rejects climate resolution, honors student achievements and historic preservation" – <https://tinyurl.com/526f8tme>
- NJPACT REAL Rules Myths and Facts – <http://dep.nj.gov/njreal/facts/>
- NJPACT REAL Rules: The underlying science: <https://dep.nj.gov/njreal/underlying-science/>
- "The outrageous ignorance of NJ's climate-skeptic lawmakers puts us at risk," Opinion, by Jennifer Coffey: <https://tinyurl.com/56v6nr8w>

– Sheila Baker Gujral



*In honor of  
ANJEC's Founder and  
First Executive Director*

**Candace McKee Ashmun  
Memorial Fund**

ANJEC established the Candace McKee Ashmun Memorial Fund in her honor to support the **ANJEC Open Space Stewardship Grant Program**. The annual program provides small grants to help environmental commissioners carry out local stewardship projects.



**ANJEC.ORG/DONATE**

To donate, use the QR code or mail a check to ANJEC, PO Box 157, Mendham NJ 07945.

## Celebrating the Pine Barrens

# The NJ Pine Barrens: A land of unique richness and wonder

## A conversation with Emile DeVito

By Julie Lange Groth, ANJEC Report Editor

Emile D. DeVito, Ph.D., Manager of Science and Stewardship at NJ Conservation Foundation, recalls exploring the Pine Barrens with his five-year-old daughter Natalie one day when they happened upon an old, abandoned structure. They discovered a mother timber rattlesnake, and she had about a dozen babies crawling all over her body. (The timber rattler is the only venomous snake found in the Pine Barrens.)

"The mother crawled into a crack to hide, but the babies didn't hide," mused DeVito. "We walked away for a bit, and when we returned, the babies were still there. All of a sudden, the mom came back. She touched each baby with her snout, and they all quickly followed her into the building."

"Look, Daddy," Natalie said. "The Mummy told them to go inside."

### Wonder among the Pines

The Pine Barrens is home to 43 threatened or endangered animal species and 92 threatened or endangered plant species, including the timber rattlesnake and the rare pygmy pine. Congress declared the Pine Barrens America's first National Reserve under the *National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978*.

Also known as "the Pinelands," or simply "the Pines," the Pine Barrens is the biggest

surviving forest on the eastern seaboard south of Maine's North Woods, with the largest body of open space on the Mid-Atlantic seaboard. Its vast, heavily forested area covers 1.1 million acres, or 22 percent of NJ's land area. The Pine Barrens encompass portions of seven counties and 56 municipalities.

The Reserve is approximately 35 percent wetlands and, underlying the region, the 3,000-square-mile Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer contains an estimated 17.7 trillion gallons of the purest drinking water in the country. It supplies over a million residents, visitors, farms and businesses as well as coastal estuaries like the Barnegat and Delaware Bays.

The Pine Barrens Byway, a 130-mile route winding through Pine Barrens forests and along meandering streams, wetlands and quaint villages, was designated the Pine Barrens National Scenic Byway in 2005. According to the NJ Department of Transportation: "A journey along the Byway beckons to the traveler to actively engage with the landscape as the original, indigenous inhabitants of the region did for thousands of years, and the European settlers that followed them generations later. ... it is a trip through time – through memory – and a glimpse at one of the most unusual natural and cultural environments left in our nation."

## Vulnerable resources under threat

Despite significant protections adopted in 1980 under the *Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP)* (page 14), the delicate ecosystem of the Pine Barrens faces serious perils. Major among them is habitat fragmen-

tation, caused by land disturbance for development, new roads and increasing auto traffic, DeVito explained. "These disruptions pose terrible barriers for reptiles, amphibians and other animals. They disrupt the natural ecology, inviting non-native species to move in."

Another major threat to the Pine Barrens cited by DeVito is a lack of respect for the land, especially by drivers of offroad vehicles (ORVs), including four-wheel-drive and all-terrain vehicles and dirt bikes. Despite State and local laws regulating the use of ORVs, devastation to sensitive habitats continues, often because the rules are almost never enforced, DeVito be-moaned. "The lack of respect is epidemic.... There are some incredibly good people out there too, but they don't have enough resources and help to fight the problem."

Climate change is another issue that is affecting natural resources throughout the world, causing rising temperatures, droughts, more frequent and severe storms and habitat challenges, to name a few.

"I'm not sure what climate change will mean in the Pine Barrens," DeVito mused. "It's a longer-term thing and it's not clear how it will play out. It's a southern habitat to its northern extent, so as average temperatures rise, it can tolerate the hotter conditions you find in southern zones."



*One of the most challenging issues affecting the Pine Barrens is the illegal use of off-road vehicles.* Credit Pinelands Alliance

While the Pine Barrens suffered the State's largest wildfire of the last two decades last April, triggered by human activity, DeVito sees naturally occurring forest fires as an important feature that helps keep the Pine Barrens vibrant. (*ANJEC Report* page 17) "Hopefully there will always be enough fire to maintain the ecology. If we try to tame the land and fireproof everything it will destroy the Pine Barrens."

## Preservation is protection

Habitat fragmentation is less of an issue in lands designated as Preservation Areas under the *CMP*, DeVito said. "Today's battles are not in the original protected areas...but land in the Regional Growth areas is very difficult to protect." He cited Ocean County as an example of how some Pine Barrens communities are working, often with partners, to permanently preserve properties and enforce ORV regulations.

"Ocean County has done a great job of expanding its park system, purchasing critical habitats and managing them well," DeVito noted.

Another example is the 16-square-mile Franklin Parker Preserve, acquired in 2003 by the NJ Conservation Foundation (NJCF). It demonstrates how nonprofit organizations can work with municipalities and



State agencies to connect precious habitats and remedy fragmentation. The Preserve was purchased by NJCF with support from the NJ Department of Environmental Protection, and a subsequent expansion was funded through various partners, including the State's Green Acres program, the William Penn Foundation and the Open Space Institute. Enhancing its value as an area of contiguous habitat, the Preserve is adjacent to approximately 250,000 acres of publicly conserved land, including: Brendan Byrne State Forest, Wharton State Forest,

*"People have to educate themselves about the Pine Barrens. It's not just a patch of woods. It's unique and fragile with an incredible number of rare species."*  
— Emile DeVito

Bass River State Forest, Greenwood Wildlife Management Area and Penn State Forest.

"People have to educate themselves about the Pine Barrens," DeVito asserted. "It's not just a patch of woods. It's unique and fragile with an incredible number of rare species." He stressed the importance of preserving and protecting as much Pine Barrens land as possible. "It's an intact ecosystem that won't remain functional if you just piece it together in patches...If you build in the middle of it, it will get whittled away."



*The timber rattler is the only venomous snake found in the Pine Barrens.*

Special Section:

## Celebrating the Pine Barrens

# The Pinelands Commission protecting the irreplaceable

By **Susan R. Grogan**, Pinelands Commission Executive Director

*"This legislation...is testimony to our civilization and future generations, that amid rapid progress, we have enough foresight to protect beauty," said former NJ Governor Brendan T. Byrne before signing the Pinelands Protection Act on June 28, 1979.*

**A**lmost five decades have passed since Governor Byrne signed the *Pinelands Protection Act*, and the Pinelands

Commission continues to implement one of the most successful, large-scale conservation plans in the country.

*The late Candy McKee Ashmun, an original Pinelands Commissioner, touring the exhibit named in her honor in 2018.*

By Paul Leakan

The Commission is an independent State agency whose mission is to “preserve, protect and enhance the natural and cultural resources of the Pinelands National Reserve, and to encourage compatible economic and other human activities consistent with that purpose.” The Commission works to achieve its mission by administering the *Pinelands Comprehensive Plan (or CMP)*, which contains the rules that guide land use, development and natural resource protection programs in the 938,000-acre Pinelands area of southern New Jersey.

Over the decades, numerous amendments have strengthened the *CMP*. Most recently, we amended the *CMP* to enhance the protection of the Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer. The revised rules took effect in December 2023. Earlier this year, we proposed several additional *CMP* amendments, including one that would redesignate a 2,400-acre area in Evesham Township from a Pinelands Rural Development Area to a Pinelands Forest Area, thereby increasing protection of the environmentally sensitive Black Run watershed.

## Dedicated staff

Our 43-member staff, many of whom have devoted their entire careers to the Commission’s mission, work daily to protect the Pinelands. Our staff:

- reviews applications for development as well as municipal and county approvals and permits to ensure that they meet a series of environmental standards;
- reviews all land use ordinances, redevelopment plans, master plans and zoning maps adopted by the seven Pinelands counties and 53 Pinelands Area municipalities to ensure ongoing consistency with the *CMP*;



- undertakes a wide variety of planning projects, including those focused on monitoring the economic health of Pinelands municipalities, piloting advanced wastewater treatment systems, identifying archaeological resources through ground-penetrating radar surveys, allocating infrastructure funding to support development in designated growth areas, and conducting research to support future *CMP* amendments;
- oversees programs to preserve land in the Pinelands, including the Commission’s own Pinelands Conservation Fund (PCF) that has helped preserve nearly 9,000 acres to date. The Commission recently launched a new round of land preservation grants through the PCF;
- implements the Pinelands Development Credit (PDC) Program, which is one of the oldest and most successful regional transfer of development rights programs in the world. PDCs have been used in approximately 750 projects to date, most of which involve residential development in designated “receiving” areas on the periphery of the Pinelands area. As a result, more than 62,000 acres in designated “sending” areas have been permanently preserved. Sending areas are comprised of lands in active berry and field agriculture as well as forested lands in the heart of the Pinelands area;
- conducts scientific research on the region’s ecology, including annual

## Trail around cranberry bogs at Double Trouble State Park

Photo by Paul Leakan

studies on water quality and levels, night-time surveys of calling frogs and toads, research on snake fungal disease, and special radiotracking studies of rare snakes and box turtles; and

- raises awareness and appreciation through education programs, field trips and other events, including the annual spring and summer Pinelands Short Courses that have educated tens of thousands of people about the region's natural, cultural and historic resources.

### A record of success

Overall, the Commission has successfully protected Pinelands resources and channeled new development to appropriate portions of the Pinelands area. Today, 488,000 acres or 52 percent of the Pinelands area has been permanently protected, with over 94 percent of the protected land in the conservation areas the Commission is charged with preserving and enhancing. Since 1980, the vast majority of new residential and commercial development approved by the Commission is in areas designated for growth by the *CMP*.

Our success would not be possible



without the dedication of our 15 Commission members, who volunteer countless hours of their time and expertise. One of Governor Byrne's first appointees to the Commission was Candace McKee Ashmun, who was a powerful voice for conservation throughout NJ and served as the founding director of ANJEC. Candy served on the Pinelands Commission for more than four decades until her passing in May 2020. Not a day goes by that we don't think of her and all that she meant to the Commission and the preservation of the Pines.

While our story of conservation continues to be written, New Jerseyans can look back on nearly 50 years of preservation and take pride in all that we've done to achieve Governor Byrne's vision of protecting beauty. 🌊



### Climate Resilience Tip Walk on the wild side

Walking tours can help members of your community appreciate the local flora and fauna in a more personal way and understand the importance of protecting habitats. Consider asking local experts to guide trail walks, garden tours or birdwatching experiences.

You could even host a wild edibles adventure focused on backyard foraging. Purslane, garlic mustard, purple dead nettle, dandelions and violets are just a few examples. Here's a good resource for potential speakers: <https://eattheplanet.org/foraging-tours-and-classes-in-new-jersey/>. 🌊





# Fire in the Pines: Ecology, stewardship and a changing climate

By **Stephen Elliott**, ANJEC South Jersey Project Specialist and  
Pinelands Preservation Alliance Director of Watershed Programs

**D**riving home on April 22nd – Earth Day – after spending the day planting trees at various sites in Evesham as part of a Sustainable Jersey project, I found myself surrounded by unmarked trucks speeding past me on Route 70, their flashing lights cutting through the late afternoon light. I was heading east from the Pinelands Preservation Alliance office in Southampton and had no idea what was going on – until I turned onto Lacey Road in Manchester. That’s when I saw it: a massive gray plume hovering above the tree line, glowing orange in the descending darkness. The Jones Road Fire had ignited earlier that day, and even from miles away, it was clear this was no ordinary brush fire. It was a fast-moving, dangerous blaze consuming part of the Pinelands.

To many, this is what fire in the NJ Pine Barrens looks like – alarming, destructive and out of control. But that image only tells part of the story. Fire has long played a critical and complex role in shaping this unique ecosystem. In fact, the NJ Pine Barrens is not only fire-adapted, but also fire-dependent. Understanding this relationship is essential to protecting both the forest and the communities that surround it.

## **A legacy of indigenous stewardship**

Long before European settlers arrived, the Lenape people used fire as a tool for managing the landscape. Through seasonal burns, typically conducted in the spring and fall, they maintained open woodlands that supported hunting, foraging and travel.





*A green sprout grows in scorched soil.*

These carefully controlled fires improved visibility in the forest, reduced pests and encouraged the growth of grasses, berries and mast-producing trees like oaks and chestnuts. This created habitat for deer, turkeys and other game. Far from accidental, this Indigenous fire stewardship reflected deep ecological knowledge and helped maintain regional biodiversity. Today, land managers increasingly recognize the value of these practices and seek to integrate traditional ecological knowledge into modern fire management.

## Fire as a natural and necessary force

Far from being solely destructive, fire is essential to the health and regeneration of the Pinelands. This fire-dependent ecosystem has evolved alongside regular, low-intensity burns that recycle nutrients, clear leaf litter and open up the forest canopy. These burns create a mosaic of habitats ranging from recently scorched clearings to maturing stands that support a wide range of plant and animal species.

Pitch pine (*Pinus rigida*), the region's iconic tree, is uniquely adapted to fire. It may even encourage it, with its abundance of flammable pitch. Its thick bark protects against heat, and it can re-sprout from its trunk and roots after a burn. The pine's cones often remain sealed with resin until exposed to high heat, at which point they release seeds onto nutrient-rich, open soil. Oaks like scrub oak and blackjack oak

## Fire risks in a changing landscape

Despite its ecological benefits, fire in the Pinelands now poses growing risks. The increasing presence of homes and infrastructure in the wildland-urban interface creates more opportunities for accidental ignitions and greater danger to people and property. The vast majority of wildfires are started by human activity, such as illegal campfires, discarded cigarettes and vehicle exhaust. The US Forest Service and National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) estimates that 85-90 percent of wildfire ignitions can be attributed to humans. These ecosystems are made even more flammable by stressors such as climate change and insects expanding their range north like the southern pine beetle.

Historic fires, including the Jones Road Fire of 2025, have shown how quickly wildfires in this region can grow in scale and intensity. Beyond property damage, wildfire smoke has serious public health impacts, particularly for vulnerable individuals with asthma or cardiovascular conditions, and especially when toxic particulates are added to the mix.

## Prescribed fire and modern management

To reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire while supporting ecological health, NJ has embraced prescribed fire as a core land management strategy. These carefully planned burns are conducted under strict

conditions with low wind and stable humidity, under the supervision of trained personnel. The practice mimics natural fire cycles, reduces fuel loads, and maintains habitat diversity.

Although counter-intuitive, prescribed fire actually encourages fire patterns that enhance carbon sequestration in soil and surviving trees. A healthy pine barrens ecosystem requires fire to control invasive plants and promote regeneration of native species – without it, iconic pine barrens species may be outcompeted.


The *New Jersey Prescribed Burn Act (2018)* created a legal framework for implementing burns on both public and private land. Additional strategies are used, such as creating firebreaks, thinning vegetation and developing forest stewardship plans for private landowners.

Public outreach remains essential. Residents are encouraged to maintain defensible space around homes, use fire-safe landscaping, and take advantage of tools like the NJ Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal to evaluate local risk. ([newjerseywildfirerisk.com](http://newjerseywildfirerisk.com))

## Fire and the climate crisis

Climate change is reshaping fire dynamics across the Northeast – and the Pinelands is no exception. Increasing temperatures, prolonged droughts and erratic precipitation patterns (such as the flash drought of 2023 and extended dry spells through 2024 and 2025) are changing the landscape faster than ecosystems can adapt. Even short periods of dry, hot weather following heavy rain can create dangerous fuel conditions.

In this new reality, fire management must be both proactive and adaptive. NJ's approach, combining science-based, prescribed fire with traditional knowledge and public education, offers a model for resilience. It's not about eliminating fire but learning to live with it responsibly.

The Pinelands is a resilient and dynamic landscape shaped by fire but increasingly threatened by climate change and human activity. By embracing fire as both a natural force and a necessary tool, we can protect this globally significant region and ensure it continues to thrive for generations to come. 

*Prescribed fires in the Pinelands help reduce risk of wildfires.* Credit [firescience.gov](http://firescience.gov)



*Lady Slipper*



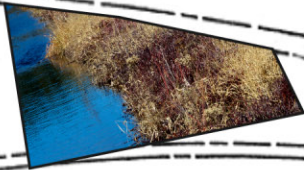
*Atlantic White Cedar*



*Twilight  
sun  
through  
the trees*



*Ocean County, NJ*



*Pine Barrens Gentian*





in the  
trees

Great Horned Owl



Pine Barrens  
tree frog



Pine Warbler



Bog  
asphodel  
flowers  
next to  
a pool



Cranberry bog at Double  
Trouble State Park





Celebrating the Pine Barrens

# Protecting endangered species from human greed

By **Jaclyn Rhoads**, Executive Director, Pinelands Preservation Alliance

Habitat loss is the number one reason animal and plant species become endangered. Since 1973, the federal *Endangered Species Act* (ESA) helped save hundreds of species – from the bald eagle to the American alligator, as well as plants like the locally beautiful swamp pink – from going extinct by preventing certain activities from taking place that would either harm or harass a listed endangered species. The *ESA* has been subject to fierce debate in Washington, DC for many decades. One side wants to make it stronger, and the other side wants to severely weaken it. This bill from the 1970s has barely been modified until now.

On his first day in office, President Trump weakened the *Endangered Species Act* by signing an executive order declaring a “national energy emergency.” Under the *Endangered Species Act*, federal agencies must consult with either the US Fish and Wildlife Service or National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) fisheries to ensure their actions will not drive species to extinction. Under the executive order, agencies will identify a list of energy projects that would largely bypass this process through means normally used only during natural disasters or national security emergencies. The executive order directed federal agencies to “use, to the maximum extent permissible under appli-

cable law, the *Endangered Species Act* regulation on consultations in emergencies (50 C.F.R. 402.05), to facilitate the nation's energy supply.”

The executive order also outlined requirements for the *Endangered Species Act* Committee to meet at least quarterly to “ensure a prompt and efficient review of all submissions” for potential actions that could facilitate fossil energy development.” The *ESA* Committee – called the “God Squad” because it consists of the Secretaries of Agriculture, Interior and Army, Administrators of the Environmental Protection Agency and NOAA Fisheries, chairperson of the Council of Economic Advisors, and a state representative – has only met a handful of times in the last 50 years, according to the Center for Biological Diversity. Under the executive order, the committee would meet an unprecedented four times a year to determine if energy projects should move forward, even if the projects will drive species to extinction.

Last April, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries proposed rule changes that will modify what it means to “harm” an endangered species – effectively lifting all restrictions on endangered species habitat modification. This seemingly minor change will open the door to rampant development, not only affecting the endangered species,

but many other plants and animals within that habitat.

## Huge implications

At first glance, this subtle rule change appears to be a trivial shift in wording but the implications are huge. For example, in NJ the wild lupine (*Lupinus perennis*) is designated “vulnerable,” and is the sole food source for the federally endangered Karner blue butterfly (*Lycaeides melissa samuelis*). That is, the larvae of this butterfly can only feed on wild lupine. To harm wild lupine would be to eradicate the Karner blue butterfly. These layers of state and federal protection are necessary to ensure the protection of species and habitat. The proposed rule change and softening of the meaning of “harm” will roll back protections for any species listed as threatened or endangered, prioritizing economic considerations over decisions traditionally based solely on science and conservation need.

## Take action

These changes are about making people more money, plain and simple.

The *Endangered Species Act* is a mechanism that protects all of us. It helps to stop development that otherwise would increase water and air pollution and asthma rates. In most places, the *ESA* is the only reason that development of sensitive lands, important forested areas or even wetlands doesn't happen. This is a big deal.

The comment period for the rule proposal has ended, but towns in New Jersey and nationwide can still take action in two ways. First, a town can pass a resolution supporting the federal *ESA* that goes to their congressional members. Second, towns need to make sure that State protections are adequate to protect these endangered species regardless of the changes in the federal law.

It's unfortunate that many people don't understand or care about the connection between wildlife and humans. This change to the *ESA* will not only drive more species to extinction but also destroy the places that support our basic needs. 🌱

*The wild lupine (*Lupinus perennis*) is the sole food source for the federally endangered Karner blue butterfly.*

Courtesy PPA



## Celebrating the Pine Barrens

Your voice matters

# Help shape the *Rancocas Watershed Restoration and Protection Plan*

By **Randi Rothmel** and **Cheryl Reardon**, ANJEC Project Directors

**T**he Rancocas Creek watershed lies almost entirely in Burlington County and drains an area of approximately 360 square miles, extending from the headwaters of its north and south branches in the Pinelands region through south central New Jersey before entering the Delaware River. As far back as 2003, a Public Advisory Committee was tasked to “develop and implement a (Rancocas Creek) watershed management plan that protects, enhances, manages or maintains natural resources, including water quality and quantity that is fishable, swimmable and potable; and improve public awareness of watershed issues.” (<https://tinyurl.com/5ha4cuf2>)

In 2022, the Rutgers Cooperative Extension Resources Management program (RCE) was awarded a 319 grant to develop a *Watershed Restoration Protection Plan (WRPP)* focusing on 21 municipali-

ties in the watershed (upstream of Route 295). This plan is based on the US Environmental Protection Agency’s nine-element *Watershed Restoration Plan* – a comprehensive strategy for improving water quality to:

1. identify causes and sources of pollution;
2. estimate pollutant loading;
3. describe management measures;
4. estimate technical and financial assistance;
5. develop an information and education component;
6. develop a project schedule;
7. develop interim, measurable milestones;
8. identify indicators to measure progress; and
9. develop a monitoring component.

*A view of Rancocas Creek from Rancocas Pointe Trail*

by Jennifer Bulava



## Help is available

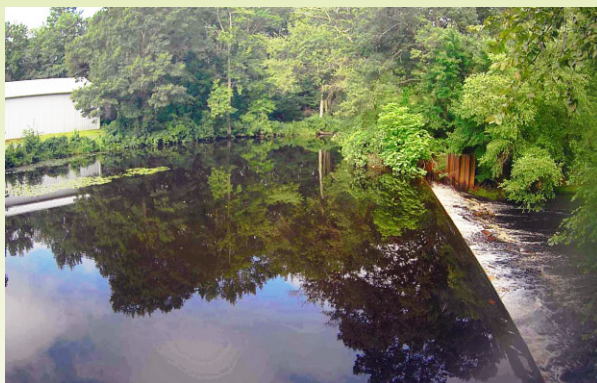
In addition, RCE has received NJ Department of Environmental Protection funding to help towns address their Municipal Separate Storm Sewer (MS4) permit requirements. ANJEC strongly urges towns to reach out to the RCE while they still have the capacity to help your town with your MS4 permit. It's free. Here's the link to the flier for information and contact details: <https://tinyurl.com/y84v6fj6>.

Identifying opportunities to reduce pollutant loading and reducing localized flooding are the goals of the *WRPP*. The *Plan* will include an impervious cover assessment, water quality impairment analysis, septic system analysis, farm analysis and restoration recommendations, including but not limited to the installation of green infrastructure (natural stormwater management) projects and recommendations for agricultural parcels for all 21 municipalities.

The 21 municipalities include: Berlin, Eastampton, Evesham, Hainesport, Lumberton, Manchester, Medford, Medford Lakes, Mt. Holly, Mt. Laurel, New Hanover, Pemberton Borough, Pemberton Township, Plumsted, Shamong, Southampton, Tabernacle, Westampton, Woodland, Wrightstown and Voorhees.

## Community engagement is key

ANJEC has received a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant to build community engagement and gather local input for the *WRPP*. Municipal leaders and members of the public will be engaged through webinars and in-person community workshops (charrettes) to get public comments on the *Plan* and identify areas of need for restoration to improve water quality, reduce flooding and advance comprehensive watershed improvement. The project will also include climate resilience planning and implementation. Strong community



*The north branch of Rancocas Creek at Pemberton*

by Jennifer Bulava

support is crucial to encourage municipal officials to adopt policies that help restore water quality to the Rancocas, such as enhanced stormwater and riparian buffer ordinances and creation of stormwater utilities as an equitable and sustainable funding source for stormwater management.

The key findings from the community charrettes will be important components for both the *WRPP* and for public input into Municipal Watershed Improvement Plans as required by MS4 permit that all municipalities must develop. While much of the *WRPP* for the Rancocas Creek being developed by Rutgers will meet many of the WIP requirements, the upfront community engagement work is a much-enhanced approach over the end-of-line public comments as required in the MS4 permit. This work will serve as a shining example of how community engagement and embracing local knowledge to coordinate environmental and community quality of life improvements should and can be prioritized.

To enhance community and municipal engagement, ANJEC looks forward to working with environmental commissions, and to working with municipalities within the *WRPP* area on the creation of environmental commissions where needed.

If you happen to live in one of the 21 municipalities covered by this *WRPP* please fill out this community survey – <https://tinyurl.com/ycnbs4sv>. For more information contact Randi Rothmel ([rrothmel@anjec.org](mailto:rrothmel@anjec.org)) or Cheryl Reardon ([creardon@anjec.org](mailto:creardon@anjec.org))




## Half by 2030: the bill that could slash NJ's food waste

By **N. Dini Checko**, ANJEC Resource Center

In 2017, New Jersey set an ambitious but achievable goal: cut food waste by 50 percent by 2030. So, what have we accomplished so far? Unfortunately, not enough. About 22 percent of solid waste in NJ is food waste, some of which was still edible when it was thrown away. This makes food the single largest component of the landfill stream in the State, outpacing all other waste categories. Meanwhile, nearly one in 10 NJ residents faces food insecurity, and the rate is even higher for children under 18. Tackling food waste by boosting composting infrastructure and increasing the donation of edible surplus food would not only help families in need but also save resources and cut landfill emissions – especially methane, a powerful greenhouse gas.


Proposed bill S2426/A2090 directs county solid waste management districts to develop and implement strategies aimed at reducing food waste. It also requires that the NJ Department of Environmental Protection adopt standards and regulations governing composting facilities. A key provision of the bill is tiered permitting, which creates different levels of regulation for composting operations based on their size and environmental impact. This commonsense approach reduces the burden on small-scale composters – like community gardens and schools – while ensuring larger facilities meet more comprehensive safety and environmental standards. Notably, the timeline for reaching the 50 percent reduction goal has been extended to 2035 to give municipali-

ties and counties more time to build out infrastructure and programs.

This bill has had to overcome a lot of hurdles but it's close to becoming law. At the time of this publication, A2090 passed out of the Assembly Caucus and S2426 is expected to move forward in the Senate as well. It will be key for Governor Murphy to sign it into law before year end. Please contact Governor Murphy (<https://tinyurl.com/m3mjpj5>). Let the Governor know it's been eight long years and NJ needs action on food waste reduction. Let's get this food waste bill over the finish line! 

### Climate Resilience Tip Know your watershed

How much do people in your town know about their local watershed? Community events are a great opportunity for conversations with residents about nearby water bodies, watershed boundaries, the quality of the water and how to protect it. Maps can help you paint a picture -- and you can find a watershed map for your zip code at <https://mywaterway.epa.gov/>. You can also find an interactive atlas of NJ and its natural resources at [www.nj-map.com/](http://www.nj-map.com/).

Remember, to know it is to love it. And to love it is to protect it. 



JOIN  
**ANJEC**  
for our  
52nd Annual

# Environmental Congress

**Friday, October 10**  
9:00 am to 4:00 pm

**New Brunswick  
Theological Seminary**

35 Seminary Place  
New Brunswick, NJ



**ANJEC's 52nd annual  
Environmental Congress**  
will be an in-person educational conference  
with a selection of workshops  
and inspirational speakers

**Workshop topics include:**

- Preparing a Watershed Improvement Plan
- NJ's Environmental Policy Update
- Acting Locally: Resources, Successes from around NJ
- Energy Innovations for NJ
- Action Update on NJPACT/REAL

Hear keynote speaker **NJDEP Commissioner Shawn LaTourette** share how  
New Jersey is positioning itself to weather climate change.  
Breakfast & lunch included with registration.

***Network with regional and local non-profits and environmental businesses.***

See presentations of ANJEC's 2025 Environmental Achievement Awards  
and 2025 Municipal Official Leadership Awards!

**Registration:**

\$115 ANJEC Member • \$135 Non-Member

**\*\*\*Early registration ends September 27**

***Register here on our secure site***

[https://secure.givelively.org/event/  
association-of-new-jersey-environmental-  
commissions/congress-2025](https://secure.givelively.org/event/association-of-new-jersey-environmental-commissions/congress-2025)

# Enhance your environmental commission with student members

By **Georgia Madiba**, ANJEC Membership Manager

**A**utumn images include leaves turning vivid colors, farmer's markets selling eye-catching squash varieties and kids heading back to the classroom. It's that time of year when students are refreshed from the summer and ready to learn and get involved in activities, especially high school students who may be looking for volunteer experience. Back-to-school time is the perfect opportunity for your Environmental Commission (EC) to involve young people.

The earlier we involve a child with any value, the better prepared they are to incorporate that value into their adulthood. Taking part in protecting the environment at an early age is key to environmental stewardship going forward. The child who participates in a stream cleanup is more likely to care about water quality later in life; the student who learns about renewable energy options is the one that will bring that knowledge to conversations in college; and the list goes on.

With the adoption of the 2020 New Jersey Student Learning Standards (NJSLs), New Jersey became the first state in the nation to require climate change to be taught across disciplines. Not only is climate change included in science and social studies where we'd usually see it, but also in health, physical education, world languages and visual and performing arts. Also impressive is that environmental programs in schools and on field trips, i.e. to the New Jersey School of Conservation, existed in various formats predating this legislation.

## Middle school environmental education

Two middle school students from Medford Memorial Middle School were moved by observations from their peers that, "Middle school students learn a ton of science, but they usually just use it in the classroom.... lead[ing] to a stale learning environment with students adopting a 'So what?' attitude and asking, 'Why is this important to me?'" They founded the Citizen Science Education Program (CSEP) in 2012. The main program objectives are for middle school students to improve the scientific literacy of their community and for them to learn, practice and improve their workforce skills in a real-time, real-world environment by becoming junior scientists with the GLOBE® program (Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment).

When the back doors of South Orange Middle School open, the portion of the Rahway River that runs through the town is a stone's throw away. Through an Environmental Commission and Science Department partnership, a 7th grade River Curriculum was born in 2013 with the help of a grant and a passion to teach environmental stewardship. Each spring, students meet with the local watershed ambassador to learn about watersheds and stormwater runoff, conduct water testing and observe macro-invertebrates. The curriculum culminates with the creation of posters on various topics learned from the program that are presented at "River Day," the town's annual stream cleanup. Consequently, the middle school became the first school in Essex County to attain River Friendly certification


from the Rahway River Watershed Association in 2022.

The students who benefit from middle school programs like these are more likely to become involved in high school, so environmental education becomes a pathway to youth involvement in ECs.


### High school students stepping up

Some Environmental Commissions are already involving youth, and your commission can join the growing list. For example, the Parsippany Environmental Committee has two high student volunteers who attend meetings, help with social media and volunteer time at events. Livingston amended their EC ordinance in 2023 to allow the mayor to appoint one or more high school students to the commission for one-year terms. In Wyckoff, the Commission’s three junior Environmental Commissioners choose a project, such as upcycled art, trees, recycling or fast fashion and make a presentation. Maplewood, Montgomery, Mountain Lakes, Pequannock, Sparta and others have student representatives on the EC.


ANJEC launched a strategic plan at the beginning of this year and among its five main goals is to, “Increase participation by next generation environmental advocates in local service on their Environmental Commissions.” ANJEC believes that this is necessary to improve the strength and diversity of volunteer environmental work that is central to ECs. ANJEC encourages commissions to build on the climate change education that students receive in school and involve young people in projects, initiatives and events in the community.

If your Environmental Commission was not included on the list of ECs with student representatives and youth involvement mentioned in this article, we’d love to hear from you – please send a message to Georgia Madiba at [gmadiba@anjec.org](mailto:gmadiba@anjec.org) with municipality name and details of your youth involvement. Otherwise, please contact us to discuss how to best involve youth members in your EC for the upcoming school year if you haven’t already. 

## A Guide to EC Youth Involvement

- **Research:** Find out how young people are currently involved with environmental protection in your town.
- **Engage:** Advertise for youth volunteers to help with an EC activity or event via community outlets, such as schools, social media groups, community centers, scout groups, clubs or religious organizations.
- **Invite:** Encourage the high school environmental club, environmental science teacher or the like to attend an EC meeting.
- **Appoint:** Add student representatives or a student liaison, usually a non-voting member, to the roster of Environmental Commissioners. Go to [anjec.org/ec-assessment/](https://anjec.org/ec-assessment/) and navigate to the “EC Youth Volunteer Form” for a sample job description and contact ANJEC for more information on the process of adding a student member. 

## Upcoming ANJEC programs

Find out about scheduled ANJEC webinars, workshops and other informative events listed on our website at <https://anjec.org/conferences-workshops/#>. You can also find tons of resources from past webinars and workshops at <https://anjec.org/past-training-resources/>. And there are more than 150 recordings of past ANJEC webinars on our YouTube channel at [www.youtube.com/channel/UCCEuWtY-juaDStB-22S5SpQ](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCCEuWtY-juaDStB-22S5SpQ). 





## New Jersey, we have a flooding problem

By **Jennifer M. Coffey**, ANJEC Executive Director

It's no secret that New Jersey has a flooding problem. We simply have too much water in the Garden State, except, of course, when we don't have enough of it. The extremes of drought and flood are getting worse, and all the reputable science says we should expect weather patterns to continue that trajectory.

Two women died in July in Plainfield during a flash flood, and hundreds had their homes and vehicles damaged, some beyond repair. The flash flood was from a summer thunderstorm, not a tropical storm, nor'easter or hurricane. The flooding was so severe that Governor Murphy issued a State of Emergency for all 21 counties. This flooding is juxtaposed with a seven-month drought warning (one step below emergency) that was finally lifted in June. October, 2024, was also the driest ever recorded.

The science is clear. The historical and present-day evidence is clear. We need to build more resilient NJ communities that can weather the increasingly intense impacts of the climate crisis. This is the most densely populated state in the country, so transforming our communities is a big job and will take time.

The proposed rules, known as NJ Protecting Against Climate Threats: Resilient Environments and Landscapes (NJPACT REAL), are common sense, scientifically backed regulations that will save lives and protect property. The rules propose a number of changes to the way NJ develops and redevelops communities.

### Elevate above known flood areas

When adopted, the NJPACT REAL rules will require that all NEW development and redevelopment in tidal areas be built above

the areas that we know are prone to flooding and will continue to flood through the year 2100. Existing development is exempt from these requirements.

Current FEMA national floodplain maps use past floodplain elevations and fail to look forward. Thanks to climate change, the past is no longer a predictor of the future, so using past data to make decisions about current development is not good enough. The NJPACT REAL rules are based on robust scientific data that distills global climate impacts into specific sea level rise modeling for our State. The data tells us that there is an 83 percent chance that NJ will experience sea level rise that is at least four feet above the FEMA floodplains by the year 2100. The proposed rules require that all new development in the coastal/tidal areas be built four feet, plus one foot of freeboard (extra room), above the FEMA floodplains.

The NJPACT REAL rules provide the same kind of construction requirements for resiliency of coastal communities that were provided to communities in freshwater areas under the adoption of NJPACT rules in 2023.

### Stormwater management requirements for redevelopment

The NJPACT REAL rules also include important provisions for the entire State, regardless of tidal or freshwater designation. It wasn't until 2003 that NJ first adopted comprehensive stormwater management provisions addressing water volume and quality. As one of the 13 original colonies, New Jersey has a lot of old development with unmanaged stormwater. We simply must address stormwater management in the existing built environment to reduce the impacts of flooding.

Functionally, redevelopment projects have been exempted from stormwater management regulations since 2003. The NJPACT REAL rules will finally fix that problem. The rules will require redevelopment projects to treat runoff for water quality to improve the cleanliness of surrounding waterways and will require all projects (new and redevelopment) to reduce the rate at which stormwater flows off a site. This latter provision will help to reduce the “flashiness” of flash floods over time.


The 2023 NJPACT rules updated the precipitation volumes for stormwater management to what is expected by the year 2100, meaning that we are now designing stormwater management systems to handle the bigger storms of future generations. Provisions in the NJPACT REAL rules will complement the 2023 regulations by addressing redevelopment in the built environment.

### Restoration and enhancement

Finally, NJPACT REAL rules will provide significant benefits for our natural environment and healthy habitats. For decades, organizations, local governments and for-profit companies have engaged in restoration projects and we’ve been asking the NJ Department of Environmental Protection to

create a permitting process that is curated for restoration rather than just development. The NPACT REAL rules include provisions that will support “Nature-based solutions, projects designed to protect, restore or enhance shorelines, wetlands and in-water areas, utilizing natural features and processes to address erosion and flooding issues, and to restore or create ecological habitat.”

The proposed rules are a tremendous improvement over regulations in place today. There are also major shortcomings in the rules; most egregious and immoral is the hardship waiver available for projects that include affordable housing. People with limited incomes deserve to live in places safe from flooding too. ANJEC opposes this hardship waiver, which is a continuation of an existing policy, and we are fighting to have it removed from the regulations.

We anticipated the adoption of the NJPACT REAL rules, without the affordable housing hardship waiver, in August 2025, but Governor Murphy had the revised, weakened proposal re-published with substantial amendments in July. The new anticipated adoption date is December 2025. Stay tuned for ANJEC’s emails with real-time updates on the NJPACT REAL rules and what they mean for your municipality. 

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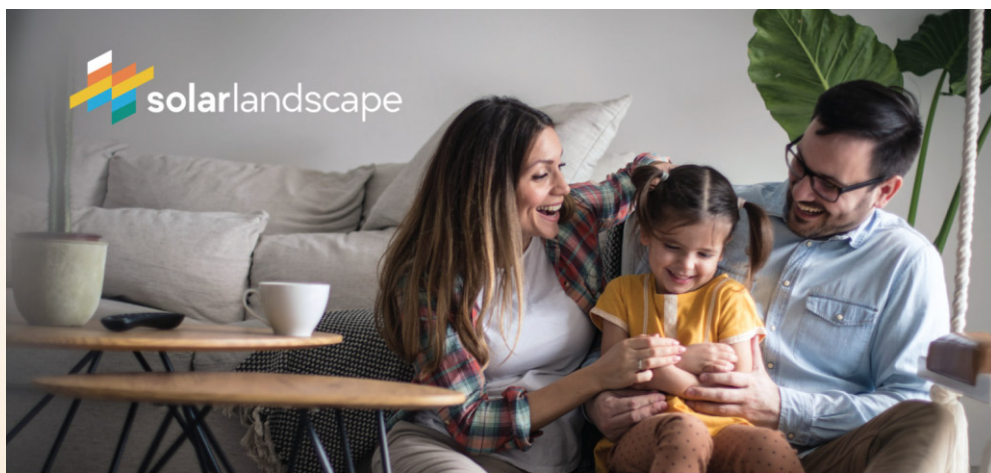
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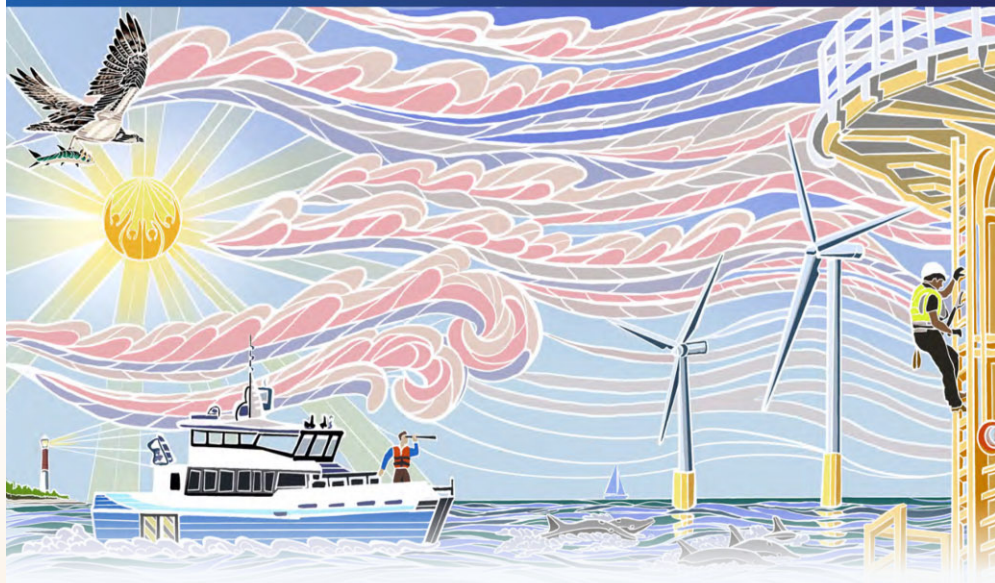
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