The New Jersey Highlands are home to some of the most awe-inspiring vistas on the East Coast, attracting millions of hikers, anglers, and paddlers. Several of the rivers that tumble through these landscapes, including large stretches of the Delaware, are federally recognized for their value, earning the status of National Wild & Scenic Rivers.

Northwest New Jersey's National Wild & Scenic Rivers are members of an exclusive club; only a quarter of one percent of all the river miles in the United States enjoy this distinction. And yet the Delaware River Watershed is lucky enough to be home to 400 miles of these rivers. In our own backyard, over 24 miles of the Musconetcong River have been designated Wild & Scenic.

Membership has its privileges

National Wild & Scenic Rivers benefit from direct protection from federal projects in their beds and banks such as dams, power lines, pipelines, Army Corps projects, and others. And in the River Management Plan prescribed for these waterways, protections spell out the need to care for the scenic, wildlife habitat, geology, and historic resources of the surrounding landscape. A special subset of Wild & Scenic Rivers, such as the Musconetcong, also obtain funding from the National Park Service. These so-called “Partnership Rivers” receive Congressional appropriations every year to support locally-led, public-private River Councils that can work on the ground to protect, restore, and engage communities around their waterways.

Bringing more benefits home for Northwest New Jersey residents

Despite the community and economic value of National Wild & Scenic River designations, Congressional funding for the program still falls short of what's needed. While there are national efforts afoot to open up more resources, there are three simple steps we can take in New Jersey—especially in the scenery-rich Highlands—to make the most of protections already in place.
What’s more, locally rooted stewardship will build the case for better funding across the program nationwide:

1. **Urge the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection to safeguard Recreational Uses.** The NJDEP currently assigns water quality protections based on an inadequate set of scientific checkboxes, not the real ways communities use their Wild & Scenic Rivers for recreation. Currently, the state’s “Outstanding National Resource Waters” designation is as close to a recreational standard as we can achieve. So local leaders can urge the NJDEP to not only carve out a true recreational standard, but immediately grant the state’s five National Wild Scenic Rivers the highest water quality protection available on the books and classify them as Outstanding National Resource Waters, as 25 other states have done.

2. **Improve Federal-State Coordination to Prevent pollution.** Federal and state agencies are supposed to coordinate to “reduce and diminish” pollution on designated Wild and Scenic Rivers. Currently, NJDEP does not clearly recognize the National Park Service. Local leaders can urge the NJDEP to adopt new procedures that ensure the state does not undermine federal protections, such as clearly indicating Wild and Scenic Rivers on Department maps, permit application checklists, and require coordination with the National Parks Service to implement protections.

3. **Join Up! Fill in partnership gaps at the local level.** Local leadership is at the heart of what makes Wild and Scenic River programs a success. However, some municipalities have not yet joined their regional River Councils to have a say in how their rivers are managed and protected. Representatives from Pohatcong, Greenwich, Bloomsbury, Hackettstown, and other municipalities, in addition to alternate representatives for councils in Washington Township (Warren County), Franklin Township (Warren County), Mansfield (Warren County) and Hunterdon County—all can play an important role in securing the benefits of the National Wild & Scenic River program for residents, visitors and business owners alike.

**Notes**

1. *Most of the Delaware is a National and Wild and Scenic River. It and its tributaries represent the largest complex of Wild and Scenic Rivers east of the St. Croix River in Wisconsin and Minnesota. There are four Partnership Rivers in the Delaware basin including Musconetcong, Lower Delaware, White Clay Creek Watershed, and the Maurice River; one additional partnership river is in (Great Egg, which is linked with the Kirkwood Cohansey aquifer), and two federal Wild and Scenic Rivers are in the basin (Middle Delaware in Delaware Water Gap National Park, and Upper Delaware Wild and Scenic River).*