

Bill would protect more northwestern Connecticut highlands

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Legislation was introduced this week to extend the federal Highlands Conservation Act, which provides funding to preserve land in the Highlands Region. The West Aspetuck Scenic Wetlands Preserve is a project that used Highlands money.

Photo: Contributed Photo/Gilbert Duffy / The News-Times



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About 1,700 acres of land in northwestern Connecticut have already been protected under the federal Highlands Conservation Act and this week a bill was introduced that would reinstate and preserve federal dollars until 2021 to protect more land.

Though the act expired in 2014, Congress has allocated millions of dollars each year since to continue to protect land in the highlands region, which covers 3.5 million acres in Connecticut, New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. About 28 towns make up Connecticut's region, including Danbury, Brookfield, Sherman, New Fairfield, New Milford, Kent and Washington.

Since the act was passed in 2004, Connecticut has received about \$5.5 million in federal funds, said Graham Stevens, with the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, which administers the program locally for the federal government.

"It's the single most important source of federal land protection money for Connecticut outside of the Farm Bill," said Tim Abbott, the greenprint director for the Housatonic Valley Association, which spearheads the highlands conservation effort in the state. "It's indispensable."

The act was used to protect former Girl Scout Camp Francis and the West Aspetuck Preserve, both in Kent, as well as Towner Hill and Eastman, both in Sherman.