

Remediation, Restoration, and Enhancement



An outing on the Hackensack



Getting a good look at Snake Hill

Susan Bass Levin, Commissioner, New Jersey Meadowlands Commission



The dock at Laurel Hill Park

Over 7,000 people gathered on the banks of the Hackensack River for Riverfest 2002 on June 29. Thousands flooded Laurel Hill Park in Secaucus to participate in environmental and cultural events that celebrate the improved health of the New Jersey Meadowlands. Public enthusiasm for the river experience and the Meadowlands District was overwhelming. The Hackensack River is now a source of inspiration and pleasure.

This is a far cry from the condition of the area when the Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission (now known as the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission) was formed in 1969. We faced an area devastated by unregulated industrialization and uncontrolled dumping. In the years prior to the 1960s, 24 garbage dumps covering more than 2,500 acres were leaching contaminants into rivers, creeks, wetlands and mud flats. The Hackensack River was an open sewer with debris, oil slicks and other pollutants choking the life out of its waters. By 1968, the contamination problem had intensified. Numerous underground dump fires filled the air with a pungent smoke. As a result, our early work focused on solid waste management with an emphasis on closing down unregulated landfills.

Today, because of our success in the closure of landfills, the Commission has been able to turn its full attention to the environmental protection and enhancement of the Meadowlands District. Under Governor McGreevey's administration, we will continue our efforts in remediation, restoration and enhancement by increasing the regulation of development in the wetlands and in open space, enhancing wildlife habitats and preparing a new Master Plan based on the Governor's Smart Growth Initiatives, which emphasize the redevelopment of brownfield properties.

The Commission has spent over \$10 million for wetland acquisitions in our campaign to regulate development. Currently, we have 1,700 acres of wetlands and management rights for an additional 1,600 acres. The Commission rezoned over 1,000 of those acres to Marshland Preservation Zones with a permanent green designation. Deed restrictions were also placed on those zones to prohibit development. An appropriation of \$1,195,400 through the Federal Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program will assist with the purchase of additional properties. The awarded appropriation will also support collaboration with other Meadowlands environmental stakeholders to compile a list of properties considered to be top priorities for purchase.

Our future plans include the creation of a wildlife preservation zone encompassing over 1,600 acres and the continuation of an aggressive open space acquisition policy. Recently, the commission re-opened many of the facilities at our Environment Center. A new interactive exhibit, The Meadowlands Experience, features videos and workbenches with microscopes, which will provide children with a "hands-on" lesson about how to convert

landfills to parks. In addition, the Commission has a relationship with NASA that will allow children to view images of the Meadowlands District from space.

September 2003 marks the groundbreaking of the EnCap Golf Project that will remediate 500 acres of abandoned landfills. And this winter, the Commission, in a joint venture with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, will unveil a new Flood Control Model for the Hackensack River.

Our efforts in enhancing wetlands continue to result in extraordinary change. The Commission has rezoned over 1,000 acres from redevelopment zones to Marshland Preservation Zones. One of the largest wetlands enhancement projects, Mill Creek Marsh, has seen increased water flow and the re-establishment of nesting and resting areas, including a special area to attract least terns, a State endangered species. Furthermore, monitoring of Mill Creek Marsh indicates that 74 species, including the State endangered black skimmer and northern harrier and the State threatened black-crowned night heron and savannah sparrow, have been sighted there.

The New Jersey Meadowlands Commission continues to be a force for change in preserving open space and saving wetlands. As the Commission celebrates over 30 years of achievement, we optimistically embrace the challenge of conserving our environment.

