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Pine Barrens tree frogs rely on sound to communicate, hunt, and reproduce. Will the high volume of sound that data centers produce impact this species? Photo by Gregory Fischer

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The Not-so-Silent Expansion of Data Centers in South Jersey

by Heidi Yeh, Ph.D., *Policy Director* and Stephen Elliott, *Director of Watershed Programs*

Across the United States, the rapid expansion of data centers is exposing weaknesses in how communities plan for electricity, water, and land use. In New Jersey, municipalities are increasingly pursuing these facilities as a form of economic development, worried that they will “miss out.” Data centers promise tax revenue and jobs, and local officials often welcome them as a modern, technology-driven industry. But behind those promises are substantial environmental demands—especially for water, energy, and land.

The new generation of data centers places significant and lasting pressure on local resources. Massive computing facilities require continuous electricity, large volumes of water for cooling, and expansive physical footprints. In landscapes like the Pinelands, where ecosystems are already under strain from development and climate change, these pressures can ripple outward through groundwater systems, wildlife habitats, and surrounding communities. Because the region sits atop the Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer, even modest changes in water use or contamination risk can have far-reaching impacts.

Despite these stakes, we are expecting municipal officials to evaluate projects with regional impacts that extend beyond their town borders. Decisions about data center development are often made quietly and early in the planning process, frequently without meaningful public engagement. Redevelopment designations allow zoning changes to move forward without the level of notice or scrutiny that residents expect. By the time communities realize what is happening, they are told that the decision has already been made and that it is too late to object.



In Vineland, NJ, DataOne is a 300-megawatt data center that was built without residents' input.

This pattern has already played out in the City of Vineland, New Jersey, which is now home to a 300-megawatt data center. An environmental impact statement for the project was not released until February 2026—even though the first phase of the facility was already built and operating. Although the developer, DataOne, has promoted plans to reduce climate and water-use impacts through innovative technologies, the project relies heavily on a natural gas power plant planned for the site. Liquefied natural gas storage associated with the facility raises additional safety concerns for nearby residents and poses potential risks to the aquifer beneath it. These choices run counter to the state's broader clean energy goals, including a transition to 100 percent clean electricity by 2035.

A similar situation is unfolding in Monroe Township, Gloucester County, New Jersey—but residents are working to stop it. In early 2025, the township quietly amended its redevelopment ordinance to add “data center” as a permitted use for the Hexa Builders Redevelopment Plan located on the Black Horse Pike. While technically public, the change went largely unnoticed by residents until plans for a warehouse were formally proposed. Fearing that this may actually be a data center in disguise, residents pushed back swiftly. Town council is now reversing the changes made in 2025, and considering a full ban.

It is clear that this new generation of data centers poses a unique threat that the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP) may not be prepared to constrain. The Pinelands have protections for the volume of water—but what about the volume of sound? Residents living

near data centers elsewhere have documented persistent sound levels that disrupt daily life. Any nearby wildlife will be affected as well. Species like the Pine Barrens tree frog and the Barred owl rely on sound to communicate, hunt, and reproduce. A narrow development buffer may do little to shield them from constant industrial noise.

Although updating the CMP could take months or even years, the New Jersey Pinelands Commission can still ensure basic transparency in the meantime. When municipalities ask the Commission to approve zoning changes like the Hexa Redevelopment Plan, those requests should receive a full public discussion and a formal vote by the commissioners. Zoning changes that could open the door to massive new infrastructure deserve scrutiny, not quiet administrative approval.

Communities are not powerless to respond, but they need to be aware and quick to raise the alarm. Across the country, communities are successfully fighting back against Big Tech's scale-at-all-costs initiative. But, the four “hyperscalers” (Alphabet, Amazon, Meta, and Microsoft) are projected to spend \$700 billion in 2026 on capital expenditures (which would include new data centers), and they move quickly. As a preventative measure, municipalities can adopt ordinances eliminating data centers as a permitted use in their towns, as Pemberton Township already has. The redevelopment loophole that helped drive warehouse sprawl—and now data center development—should also be addressed. Neighbors should be notified about zoning changes, and we should not allow forests, farms, and fields to be “redeveloped” that were never developed in the first place.

Learn more about this hot issue and sign our petition to the Governor calling for a 3-year ban on new data centers at pinelandsalliance.org/datacenters.





The Fix Our Parks campaign recommends an increase in the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's budget to address long-deferred maintenance in state parks, forests, wildlife management areas, open space preserves, and historic sites.

Expectations for the Sherrill Administration

by Michael Klein, JD, Ph.D, *Director of Government Relations*

With the existential elimination of federal environmental protections, New Jersey – under the Sherrill Administration – needs to reinforce and expand our comprehensive laws and regulations that guard our air, water, and land statewide and in the Pinelands in particular.

First, we urge Governor Sherrill and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) to retain the Resilient Environments and Landscapes (REAL) rules, adopted this January. These standards are essential to protect communities from increased flooding and rising seas. In the Pinelands, we are focused on protecting the Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer, which provides drinking water for about a million residents and irrigation for thousands of acres of farms.

Second, we must enforce off-road vehicle protections on public lands. The Wharton State Forest Visiting Vehicle Use Map – which provides over 270 miles of access across more than 124,000 acres – exemplifies how to balance recreational use of a delicate ecosystem. The Wharton Map enhances both visitors' experiences and public safety by facilitating State Park Police patrols, routine maintenance, and access for emergency personnel, while also protecting wildlife habitat and rare plant species. To achieve this successful balance statewide, we need consistent enforcement and adequate staffing.

Third, we urge Governor Sherrill to strengthen NJDEP's budget. Following the recommendations

of the "Fix Our Parks" campaign, New Jersey must increase funding to restore and address long-deferred maintenance in state parks, forests, wildlife management areas, open space preserves, and historic sites. We also need more staff to manage increased public use of these resources, especially as New Jersey expects record numbers of visitors this summer celebrating America's 250th birthday and attending World Cup games.

In addition, we call on Governor Sherrill to support the following legislative initiatives:

- The Polluters Pay Act to hold fossil-fuel polluters accountable for damage from climate change and help our communities strengthen their resiliency;
- The New Jersey Clean Energy Act to establish a 100-percent clean electricity standard;
- The Green Amendment to enshrine in our State Constitution the right to pure water, clean air, and healthy habitats. The amendment would also establish that the State of New Jersey is the trustee of our public natural resources, protecting them as common property; and
- Legislation prioritizing natural grass over synthetic turf in public funding decisions.

These are important steps. Together, they create durable, overlapping protections that will make New Jersey stronger, especially as the federal government weakens long-standing protections of our air, water, land, and wildlife.

Pinelands Research Institute Updates

by Jennifer Adams Krumins, Ph.D., Science Director

The summer of 2026 is going to be an exciting inaugural season for the Pinelands Research Institute, located at the Pine Tree Center. We are breaking ground on facility improvements at the Institute. Two of the cabins are being updated and improved for overnight stays, and the conference center is also being updated with improved bathroom access and fire safety. These improvements are going to support researcher activities, overnight stays, educational activities, and student groups. In fact, we already have multiple different student researchers scheduled to work at the PRI this summer. We will host at least five students from five different universities in the Northeast. Some of these students will work in partnership with the US Forest Service to study the impacts of fire in Pine Barrens forests. One of the students is studying the microbiome of amphibians in the Pine Barrens, and another is studying the genetic relationships among carnivorous plants, specifically *Utricularia*, commonly known as bladderworts. The research is diverse, but it all supports a deeper understanding of the Pine Barrens ecosystem and the biodiversity it supports.

Education and outreach are central to the mission of the Institute. To address this mission of education, we hosted our first seminar speaker in March, Scott Stanford of the NJ Geologic and Water Survey. Approximately fifty people attended to listen and learn about the geological history that has shaped South New Jersey. We hope this is the first of more seminars to come. In May, we are hosting The Soil Ecology Society, an international group of scientists focused on understanding the living world of soils and how that supports healthy ecosystems. This meeting will bring both national and international scholars to the PRI and the Pinelands Alliance to discuss their science and applications to conservation and understanding the Pine Barrens environment. In June, the PRI and the Alliance are holding the 4th Annual Science Forum. The topic this year is "Water: The Lifeblood of the Pines", and all are welcome.

You can learn more about upcoming events and PRI at pinelandsresearch.org.



UPCOMING EVENTS

Pinelands Adventures

**Paddling Season Opens
April 6th!**

Explore the Pine Barrens by canoe or kayak! You can paddle on your own, paddle with a guide, or rent a boat with Pinelands Adventures. We also offer guided hiking and history tours.

Learn more at:
www.PinelandsAdventures.org

Spring Native Plant Sale

**Friday, April 24, 3-6:00 pm* &
Saturday, April 25, 9 am-12 pm**

at Pinelands Alliance
17 Pemberton Rd, Southampton, NJ 08088

Get wild with native plants this spring! Native plants are great for your yard and for wildlife, but they can be hard to find. We can help. Find plants native to the Pine Barrens and South Jersey at our spring native plant sale.

**Friday is the Members Only Plant Sale.
Saturday is the Public Sale.*

Learn more at:
pinelandsalliance.org/events

Pinelands Science Forum: **Water - The Lifeblood of the Pinelands**

Tues, June 3, 8:30 am-3:30 pm
at Pinelands Alliance
17 Pemberton Rd, Southampton, NJ 08088
\$50pp. Students \$20pp

This forum will focus on the hydrology of South Jersey, the predictions for climate impacts in the future, and the aquatic biodiversity this system supports. Hosted by PRI.

Learn more at:
pinelandsalliance.org/scienceforum2026

Building Lasting, Layered Protections in Uncertain Times

by Heidi Yeh, Ph.D., Policy Director and Stephen Elliott, Director of Watershed Programs

Many people have been alarmed by the federal administration's recent rollbacks of environmental protections, and the Pinelands Alliance shares those concerns. A wave of executive actions favoring fossil fuel development, weakening natural resource protections, and reducing federal funding threatens decades of hard-won progress.

These developments reveal an important lesson: policies and regulations, no matter how strong they seem, can change quickly when political priorities shift. Environmental safeguards that exist only in statutes or agency rules can be weakened, rewritten, or eliminated in a relatively short period of time.

Recent federal decisions illustrate just how quickly those changes can happen. Early in 2025, an executive order opened roughly 280 million acres of federally owned public land to expanded logging and development, raising concerns about habitat loss and increased wildfire risk. Another order declared a "national energy emergency," allowing fossil fuel projects to bypass certain environmental reviews under the Endangered Species Act while also halting certain renewable energy projects that could have helped to address this energy emergency. More recently, the federal government has moved to withdraw the Endangerment Finding that underpins the nation's ability to regulate

greenhouse gases, and proposed changes to the Clean Water Act that would limit states' ability to review and condition federally permitted projects that may affect their waters.

Actions like these risk accelerating climate change, harming wildlife, and degrading air and water quality. They also demonstrate how vulnerable environmental protections can be when they rely solely on policies that can be changed by shifting political leadership.

The Pinelands itself offers an important example of why layered protections matter. The region was first safeguarded through federal legislation creating the Pinelands National Reserve. New Jersey added another layer through state environmental laws and oversight by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP). At the regional level, the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan establishes detailed rules to protect forests, wetlands, and water resources, implemented by the New Jersey Pinelands Commission.

Together, these overlapping safeguards create a more resilient framework for protecting one of the largest remaining open landscapes on the East Coast. When one layer weakens, the others can still help hold the line.

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Having layered protections in the Pinelands promotes healthy and thriving ecosystems. Photo by Timothy O'Brien

Reflections on the 2025 Season & Looking Ahead to 2026

by Jeff Tober, Farm Manager Rancocas Creek Farm

Hello and greetings from Rancocas Creek Farm! We had an actual winter in New Jersey, which bodes well for the farm in many ways. The cold temperatures knock back agricultural pests and pathogens. The snow can help recharge the aquifer, and studies show that snowfall can provide soil with some nitrogen. We avoided any damage to our greenhouses, and I got to break out the snowshoes and do a little exploring around the property, which was fun.

And now, as the days get longer and warmer and spring is here, we have started farming and are getting prepared for the coming season. The farming calendar very much mirrors the baseball calendar. As pitchers and catchers report to Florida, we welcome back some return farmers, in this case, John Hawkins, Zack Boyd, and Jack Swenson. And as the ball players are shaking off the rust and preparing for opening day, we are starting our first seeds in the greenhouse (parsley, snap dragons, cabbage, and onions) and tuning up our tractors and farm equipment. We usually get our first fields prepped and ready for plants at the very end of March, just when teams return North and are getting set for opening day. And if the fields are either frozen or dry enough, March is a good time to spread some of the black, rich compost we made last year to help build soil health and fertility.

We are excited to welcome two new Farm Apprentices to the team, Jordan Gargano and Isabel Marquez. As participants in our Farm Apprenticeship program, they will work full-time from mid-March to Thanksgiving. The idea is to find great, enthusiastic, hard-working candidates and give them a lot of knowledge and responsibility. It is a traditional 'learn by working' experience, and it is how I started my farming career many years ago. Apprentices will get to do just about everything during their stint at RCF, from greenhouse work, tractor operation, all the field work, livestock management, and much more. Apprentices can also participate in on and off-farm educational opportunities. And this year, Zack is going to serve as coordinator for NJCRAFT (Collaborative Regional Association for Farmer Training). He will organize a series of farm tours, workshops, and gatherings for young farmers across the state.

Our 2025 growing season was our most productive since we started in 2020. We grew 141,248 pounds of chemical-free produce for over 400 families in our Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), wholesale customers, and farm markets. We expanded our Asian Pear orchard, raised 12 pigs on pasture, built a new office and walk-in cooler, added a third tractor, and installed a terrific underground irrigation system. We had an amazing farm crew, and I want to thank everyone who contributed to our successful season. I especially want to thank Jenna Smith, Noele Walters, and Sophia Buckalew, who worked full-time at RCF in 2025 and have all moved on to other exciting endeavors.

So here we are on the cusp of the 2026 season. We still have CSA shares available: full season (21 week) and flexible ten week shares.

To learn more and join the CSA please visit www.rancocasreekfarm.org or contact me at jeff@pinelandsalliance.org.

We hope to see you at the farm in 2026!



Our fields of pick-your-own flowers are shareholders' favorite!
Who doesn't love a vase of flowers on the table?

Building Lasting, Layered Protections in Uncertain Times



Maya & Miracle, Pinelands Alliance's 2025 interns, spoke about the importance of a NJ Green Amendment at municipal meetings, inspiring people of all ages to work towards a greener future for generations to come.

At the same time, the current moment reminds us that environmental protections depend not only on laws but also on the people and institutions that enforce them. Federal funding cuts can ripple downward, affecting agencies such as the National Park Service and reducing resources that support environmental programs at the state and regional level. The NJDEP also relies heavily on federal funding to carry out its work. When federal support weakens, the importance of strong protections at other levels of government becomes even clearer.

One important step New Jersey can take is to add a more durable layer of protection through a Green Amendment to the state constitution. A Green Amendment would establish every resident's fundamental right to clean air, pure water, and a healthy environment. By placing these rights in the constitution, New Jersey would help ensure that environmental protection remains a guiding principle in government decision-making, regardless of changing political priorities.

Just as the Pinelands benefits from multiple layers of protection, a Green Amendment would strengthen the broader environmental framework that safeguards communities across the state. The states of Montana, Pennsylvania, and New York already have them. In New Jersey, the amendment was originally proposed in 2017, but has been languishing without progress ever since. With a renewed effort from environmental organizations and concerned citizens, now is the time to reclaim power over our communities.

Residents can help move this effort forward by contacting their state legislators and encouraging their municipalities or counties to pass resolutions supporting a Green Amendment to the New Jersey Constitution. Strengthening environmental protections at every level of government will help ensure that clean air, pure water, and healthy landscapes remain protected for generations to come.



Visit pinelandsalliance.org/new-jerseys-green-amendment for more information including instructions on how to take action.



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