

# The Hackensack Meadowlands Initiative

## *A Watershed Partnership for Restoration*

### *What is the Hackensack Meadowlands Initiative?*

For over two centuries, the abundant natural resources of the Hackensack Meadowlands and the surrounding Hackensack River watershed helped support the growing human population of the New York-New Jersey Harbor area. By 1900, all of the Meadowlands' timber and most of its fish and shellfish resources were depleted. Also, the Meadowlands ecosystem was already suffering from extensive wetland filling and degradation that would last for decades. Although federal and State laws ended the worst abuses of the Meadowlands in the 1970s, there has been considerable disagreement regarding the best use of its remaining open space.

In response to the public's concern, a new partnership, the *Hackensack Meadowlands Initiative (Initiative)*, has evolved to clean up, restore, and protect this ecosystem. The Initiative is a watershed partnership that brings federal and State agencies and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation together to work with key local stakeholders to remediate, restore, enhance, and protect the Meadowlands ecosystem. Today, the Meadowlands is increasingly valued as a national treasure for fish and wildlife and a vital natural area that provides recreational, educational, and social opportunities for the region's 20 million residents.

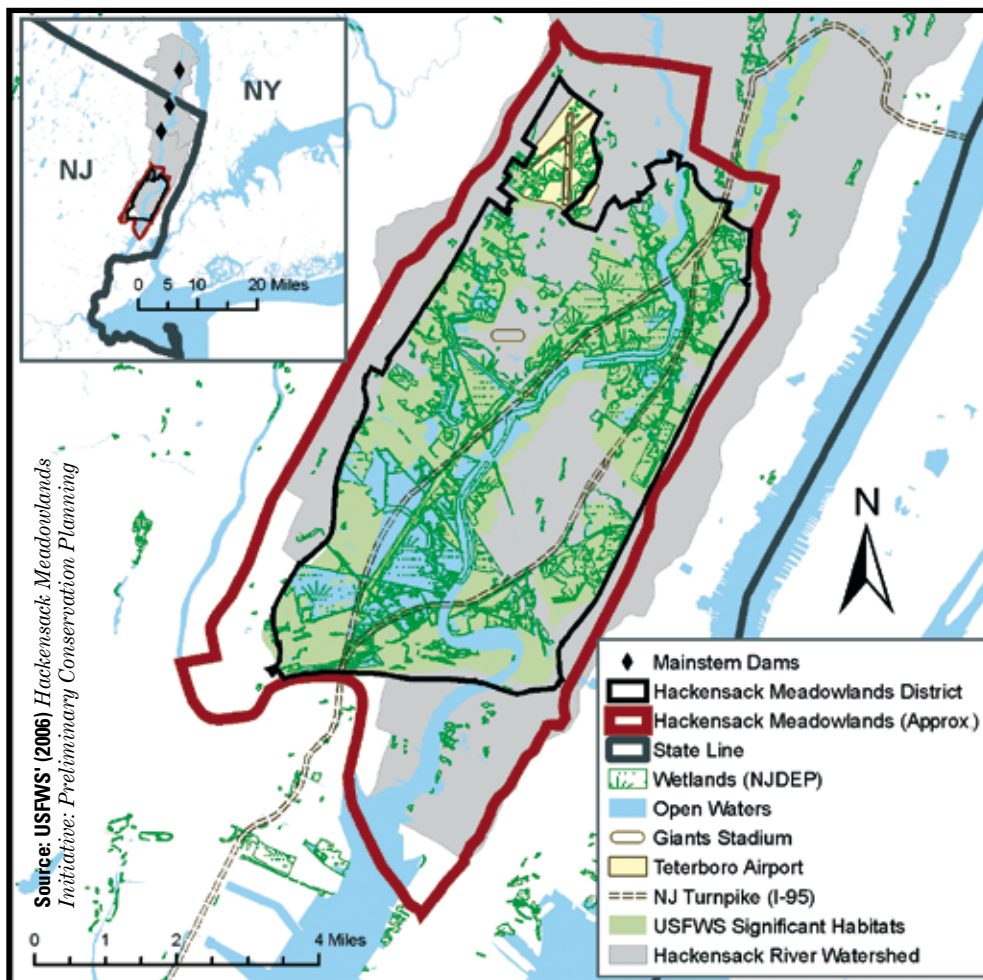


### *What are the Initiative's key challenges?*

The *Initiative* faces considerable challenges to restore and protect the Meadowlands. The ecosystem is impaired by contamination from former industrial sites as well as contamination and nutrient inputs from sources throughout the New York-New Jersey Harbor. The Hackensack River, backbone of the Meadowlands, flows at approximately 10 percent of its former volume. The major "freshwater" component of the river's flow is the daily discharge of nearly 100 million gallons of nutrient-laden sewage effluents. Dense stands of common reed and other exotic species have reduced the value of wetlands for fish and wildlife. Historical land use has fragmented wetlands and other open space. Continued development potentially reduces wetland functioning and threatens to isolate remaining natural areas.

### *Why is the Initiative using a watershed approach?*

A watershed approach focuses efforts to address priority problems within an area that approximates an ecosystem. Activities anywhere within the watershed may affect the environment "downstream." Thus, the *Initiative* is focusing on the entire Meadowlands ecosystem, including the Hackensack Meadowlands District and wetlands in the surrounding Hackensack River watershed, in order to achieve a successful, comprehensive restoration. This watershed approach will improve environmental assessments and subsequent remediation and restoration; furthermore, it will make most efficient use of available financial resources.



Source: USFWS' (2006) Hackensack Meadowlands Initiative: Preliminary Conservation Planning

The Hackensack River Watershed (defined in gray) extends north into New York State.

## Why is the Initiative restoring the Meadowlands?

The Meadowlands is among the largest brackish estuarine complexes in the northeastern United States and provides essential ecosystem functions, such as natural protection from storms and floods. Its remaining 8,400 acres of mostly wetlands and waters provide vital habitats that support the region's fish and wildlife resources, including roughly 300 species of plants, almost 75 percent of New Jersey's 440 bird species, and nearly 90 species that are rare or managed throughout the metropolitan region. Restoring the Meadowlands successfully will:

- (1) re-establish cleaner and more productive habitats that support healthy fish and wildlife,
- (2) provide exceptional opportunities for recreational, educational, and social activities, and
- (3) perpetuate the positive image that is growing in this long-neglected urban area.



Least sandpipers at Mill Creek.

USFWS / Gene Nieminen

## What is the Initiative doing to restore the Meadowlands?

Partnerships, remediation, enhancement, acquisition, public education, and research are central efforts of the *Initiative*.

- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission (NJMC), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) began the *Hackensack Meadowlands Ecosystem Restoration Study* to restore numerous sites.
- The NJMC has acquired or leased many potential restoration sites, manages the Sawmill Creek Wildlife Management Area, is studying existing and potential restoration sites, and promotes varied outreach and public education.
- The New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife (NJDFW) is developing a *Wildlife Action Plan for the Hackensack Meadowlands* to manage the area's fish and wildlife, including State-listed threatened and endangered species.
- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) has rekindled its remediation efforts in the Berry's Creek Study Area, one of North America's worst mercury-contaminated wetlands. The USEPA is funding restoration of wetland sites on Overpeck Creek, the NJMC's studies of capping methods, and remote-sensing technologies.

- The USFWS and the NJDFW developed *A Vision Plan*, which identified fish and wildlife goals and tasks to be accomplished for the Meadowlands.
- The USFWS has developed *The Hackensack Meadowlands Initiative: Preliminary Conservation Planning* to address baseline conditions and make recommendations for contaminant remediation, water-quality improvement, and habitat restoration.
- The *Initiative* members and other organizations updated the planning and coordination of remediation and restoration efforts at the 4<sup>th</sup> Stakeholders' Work Session.

The remediation and restoration of the Meadowlands is a substantial undertaking; restoration of the Meadowlands will succeed as members of the *Initiative* and other stakeholders continue to work together.





Greater yellowlegs at a restoration site.


USFWS / Gene Nieminen


## Partners in the Initiative.


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**AUG 2006**