Raritan Headwaters Association

2025-2026 Report



Celebrating 30 years of Nature Camp

Sharing Our Impact

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Our vision is that everyone within our reach has access to safe, clean water that is swimmable, fishable, and above all, drinkable.



Dear Friends,

Every drop of clean water, every preserved acre, and every restored stream tell the story of a community coming together to safeguard our region's future. Your generosity has enabled Raritan Headwaters Association to make meaningful progress in 2025 and into 2026. With your help, we are protecting vital water resources, improving watershed health, and securing the clean water that sustains our communities. Together, we are creating a lasting impact for people and the environment.

Guided by our 2025–2027 Strategic Plan, we are bringing these efforts together with an even greater focus on measurable impact. One exceptional milestone was the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's certification of RHA's water quality laboratory, which strengthens our ability to produce data that inform water quality assessments, municipal planning, stream restoration, and state decisions on water resource protection.

At the same time, the challenges facing our watershed are intensifying. Drought, increasingly intense storms, development pressure, emerging contaminants, and reduced government funding all make independent watershed science and local action essential.

The accomplishments highlighted on these pages reflect the entire RHA community. Thank you for investing your time, expertise, and resources to protect our watershed's land, water, and wildlife. Together, we are building healthier, more resilient communities for generations to come.

Onward,

Mara

Mara Tippett,
Executive Director

Raritan Headwaters Association is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit conservation organization. When you support us, you can trust that your generosity is being maximized to make the greatest possible impact.

Our Mission: Since 1959, Raritan Headwaters Association has worked to secure clean water for present and future generations. We engage residents and decision-makers in protecting land and water in our watershed and beyond through science, education, advocacy, restoration, and land preservation.

Advancing Lasting Protection

Headwaters to the Bay

The Headwaters to the Bay Initiative connects conservation efforts across the entire Raritan River watershed—from the forested headwaters in Morris, Hunterdon, and Somerset counties to the Raritan River estuary and Raritan Bay. The initiative recognizes that upstream decisions affect communities, drinking water, recreation, and ecosystems throughout the basin.

RHA is a lead partner in this long-term conservation strategy, connecting agencies, nonprofits, academic institutions, and local communities around a shared roadmap for watershed protection, restoration, and sustainable management. By aligning priorities and sharing information across the basin, Headwaters to the Bay aims to turn individual projects into a greater collective impact.

Wild and Scenic Designation: The Path Forward

In 2025, the effort to secure federal recognition for the Upper Raritan River watershed reached an important milestone when bipartisan legislation was introduced in both the U.S. House and Senate, directing the National Park Service to conduct a formal study of the North Branch, South Branch, and Lamington/Black River, along with their tributaries, to assess their potential inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

The legislation builds on a National Park Service reconnaissance survey requested in 2023, which identified the watershed's exceptional ecological, recreational, and cultural values and helped make the case for a full study.

A Partnership Wild & Scenic designation would establish a long-term, locally driven framework to protect the rivers' clean water, habitat, and recreational values while connecting communities with federal technical assistance and potential funding for restoration, conservation, recreation, and stewardship. It does not transfer land ownership to the National Park Service or replace state and local authority.

photo by Dallas Hetherington

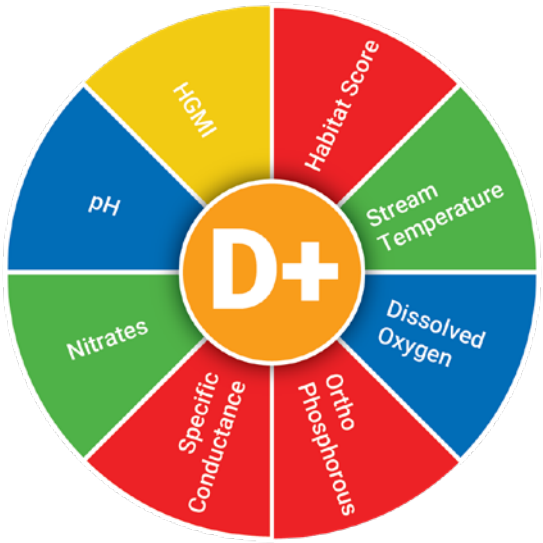
Protecting Water Quality

RHA's Stream Monitoring Program remains a cornerstone of our work, providing a clear, long-term view of stream health across the Upper Raritan watershed.

In June 2025, with the help of trained citizen scientists, our staff monitored biological, chemical, and habitat conditions at 85 sites throughout the watershed, adding to more than three decades of data. The results are presented in our 2025 Water Quality Report Card, which highlights areas of concern and underscores the value of sustained, science-based monitoring.

For a closer look at what we found, read the full report here...

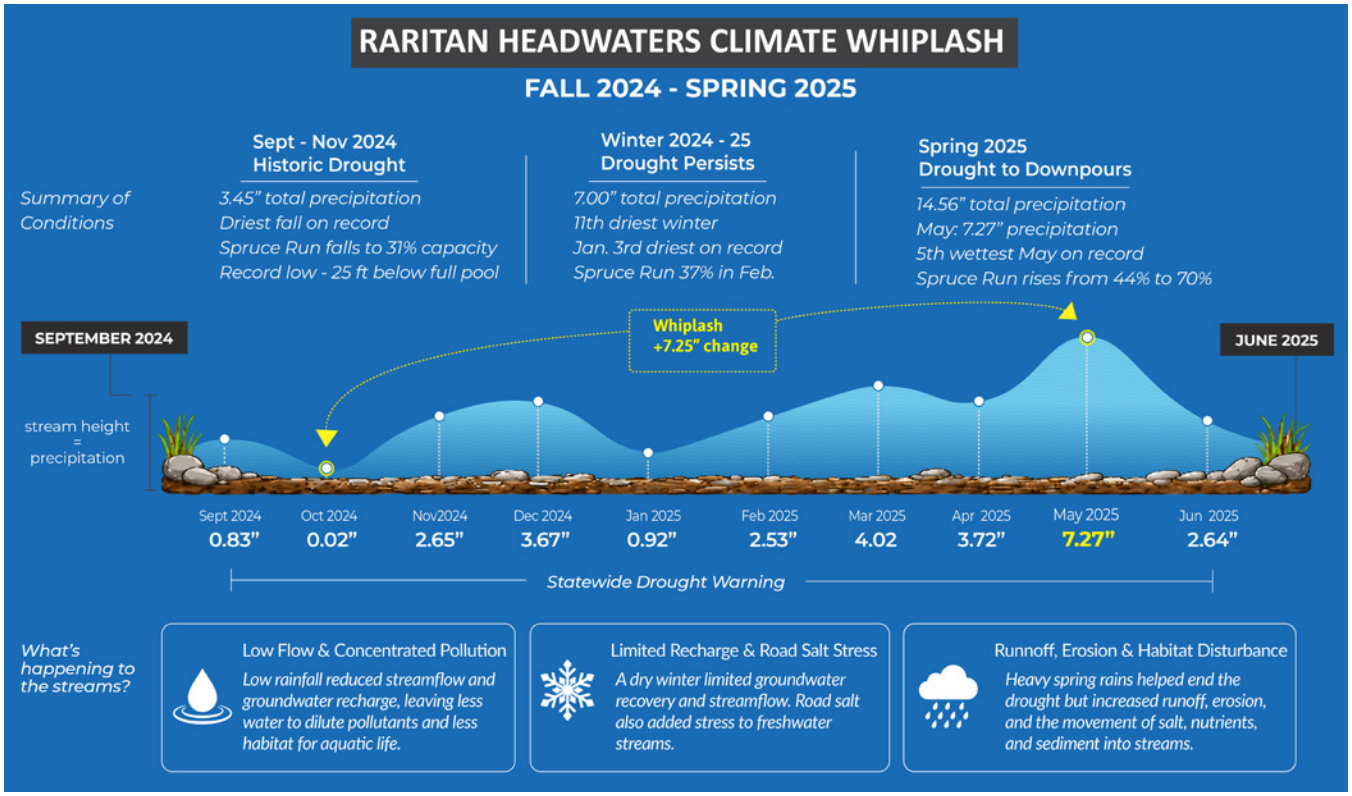
2025 Surface Water Report Card



Raritan Headwaters health scale

Very good A B C D F Very poor

The year brought dramatic weather swings, from prolonged drought to intense rainfall and storms. Our climate whiplash infographic illustrates how rapid shifts between too little and too much water can strain streams, increase runoff and erosion, and transport pollutants across the landscape. By tracking these changes over time, RHA is helping communities better understand the pressures on our waterways and informing the work needed to protect and restore them.



Protecting Public Health through Well Testing

Private wells aren't regulated like public water systems, so homeowners rely on testing like ours to know what's in their water.

2025 Well Test Program

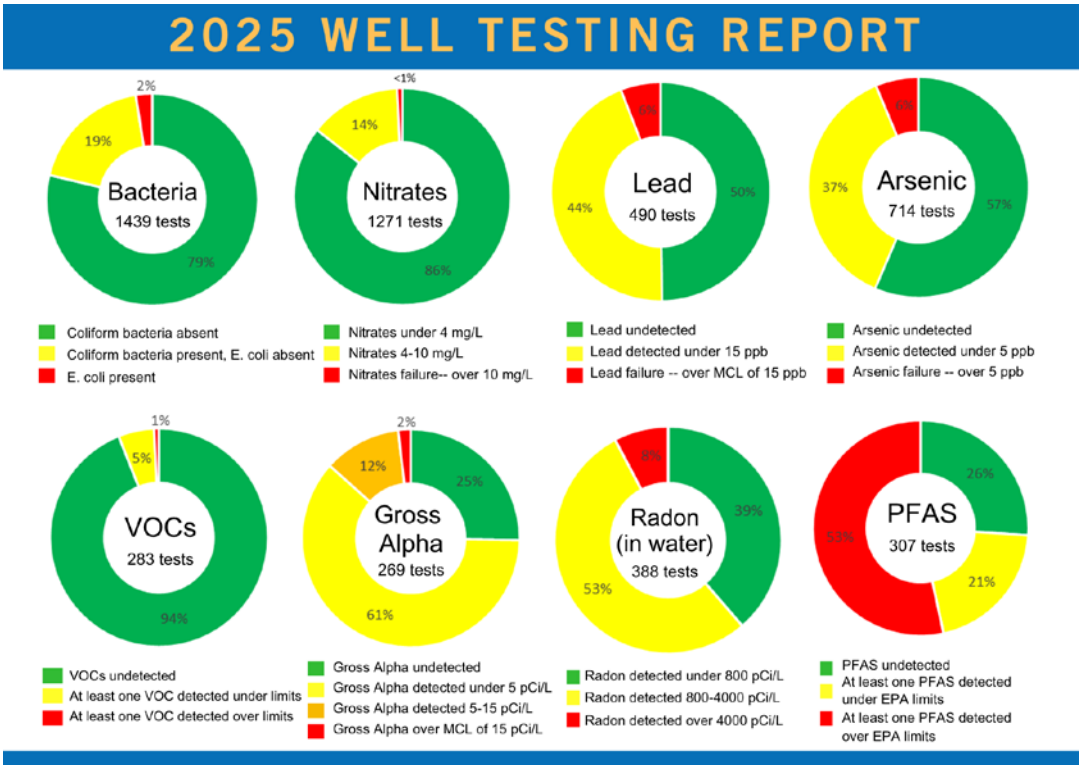
In 2025, RHA's well testing program screened 1,322 taps across more than 35 municipalities and conducted 6,437 tests. Results show why testing matters: about one in five wells had coliform bacteria (2% with E. coli), 6% exceeded New Jersey's arsenic standard, and lead was detected in half of the taps.


Hillsborough Community Well Test Event

PFAS Monitoring and Research

PFAS, often called "forever chemicals," have rapidly become a leading public health crisis, turning up in streams, groundwater, and drinking water wells. RHA is expanding PFAS testing and helping residents understand potential risks. Between 2022 and 2025, RHA detected PFAS in 73% of 697 private wells tested, and 53% exceeded EPA drinking water standards. Demand for PFAS testing in residential wells increased by 68% in 2025 compared with 2024.

RHA is now expanding this work beyond individual wells to better understand how PFAS move through the watershed. By sampling surface water, streambed sediment, and riparian soils, our scientists are working to establish a regional baseline, identify potential hotspots, and clarify pathways among land, groundwater, and streams.



Advocacy: Turning Science into Action

RHA's advocacy is grounded in science and focused on protecting the lands and waters that supply clean drinking water to communities across New Jersey.

Raritan Headwaters supports regulations and policies that protect clean water and natural habitats. We use our science-based data to inform policy-making at all levels of government. We empower citizen advocacy by providing information and tools to help the public share their positions with elected officials and decision makers in the communities where they live.

In 2025 and 2026, RHA staff applied science-based expertise to inform land-use decisions, including proposals to develop large-scale data centers. In June 2026, Executive Director, Mara Tippett wrote an opinion piece published by NJ.com expressing concerns about the rapid expansion of large-scale data centers in New Jersey. She addressed potential threats to drinking water supplies, including water demand, recharge, stormwater management, and appropriate siting, and advocated stronger state standards and local safeguards.

Scan the QR code to read more.

Partnering to Protect Our Watershed

RHA works with local officials and statewide partners to ensure that decisions on land use, development, and water resources are informed by sound science.

In 2025 and 2026, RHA partnered with Rutgers University, the New Jersey Water Supply Authority, local municipalities, and regional stakeholders to develop watershed restoration plans for the North Branch, South Branch, and Lamington River watersheds. These plans identify pollution sources, prioritize restoration projects, and provide a roadmap for securing future funding to improve water quality, reduce stormwater impacts, and strengthen watershed resilience.

The Budd Lake Watershed Restoration and Protection Plan exemplifies this approach by bringing together partners to achieve watershed-wide solutions. Early implementation has already yielded tangible results, including expanded watershed monitoring, community stormwater education, stormwater management projects, and a comprehensive baseline study to guide future restoration work.



RHA Watershed Scientists monitor Budd Lake

At 374 acres, Budd Lake is the largest naturally formed lake in New Jersey and the headwaters of the South Branch Raritan River.

Natural Solutions for Climate Resilience

Planting for Clean Water, Wildlife, and Climate Resilience

RHA's riparian forest restoration initiative is helping to rebuild one of our most effective natural defenses against water pollution and climate impacts. Since 2022, RHA and our partners have planted 10,000 native trees and shrubs along streams throughout the watershed, restoring critical habitat and strengthening the natural buffers that protect clean water.

Through partnerships with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP), and others, RHA is restoring degraded streamside forests at priority sites throughout the watershed. As these forests mature, they will filter polluted runoff, stabilize streambanks, reduce erosion, help combat rising stream temperatures, improve habitat for fish and wildlife, and absorb floodwaters during intense storms.



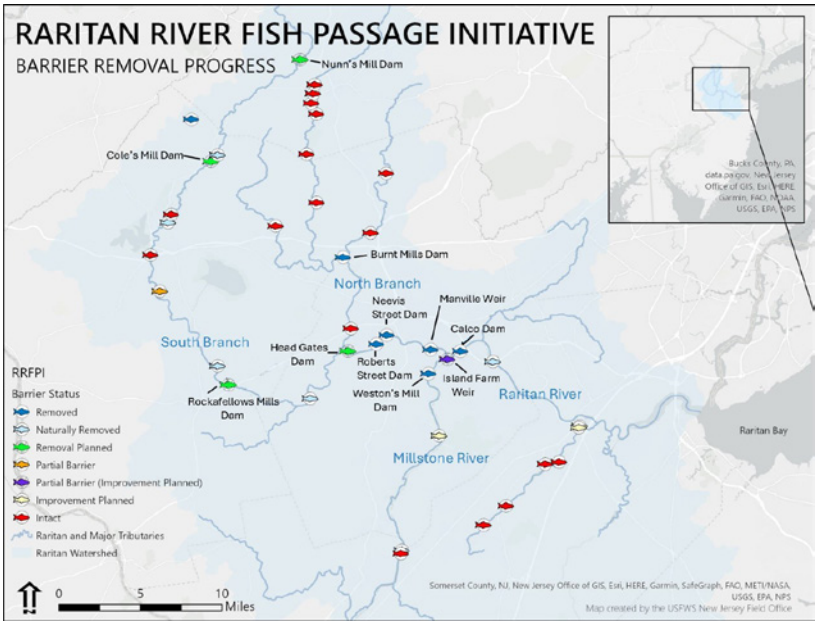
Robert Lucas, Restoration Coordinator



Tree planting at Hunts Mill Park



Rockafellows Mill Dam



Bringing our Rivers Back to Life

RHA leads efforts to restore free-flowing rivers, improve aquatic habitat, address aging dams, and advance the next phase of the Raritan River Fish Passage Initiative.

A $2.3 million NOAA award is supporting the removal of the Rockafellows Mill Dam on the South Branch Raritan River. In partnership with NOAA, NJDEP, and USFWS, RHA is also advancing restoration projects at Cole's Mill Dam and Nunn's Mill Dam on the South Branch. These projects will improve fish passage and river health and address deteriorating structures that pose long-term ecological and public-safety risks.

In partnership with The Nature Conservancy, we're also advancing plans to remove remnant dams at Darts Mill and Weiss Mill on the South Branch. Together, these projects will help create a healthier, safer, and more connected river system.

Educating Tomorrow's Stewards



RHA's Summer Day Camp celebrates 30 years

Since 1996, Nature Day Camp at Fairview Farm has inspired young explorers to discover, learn, and play outdoors on our beautiful wildlife preserve. We are proud to celebrate this milestone and the thousands of children who have made lasting memories, formed friendships, and built connections with nature through RHA.

Raritan Headwaters Association's parent organizations, the Upper Raritan Watershed Association (URWA) and the South Branch Watershed Association, were pioneers in environmental education. Because opportunities and resources for our citizens, particularly children, to learn about the natural environment were too limited, both SBWA and URWA expanded their educational activities in the 1990s.











This year, we are celebrating the founding of Nature Camp at Fairview Farm, which began in the summer of 1996 as a weeklong session with a dozen local children, ages 5 to 8, in a small nature classroom in the barn. Our 2026 Summer Nature Camp hosted 192 youth, ages 3 to 17, from the broader watershed region and beyond. The seven-week program was filled with fun, creative outdoor adventures and hands-on nature lessons.

RHA's education programs connect people of all ages and abilities with the natural world and provide them with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to become environmental stewards.

Youth Leadership: ELA and Y.E.S.

RHA is creating opportunities for young people to transition from environmental learning to environmental leadership. The Environmental Leaders Academy (ELA) brings high school students together for an immersive experience in field science, conservation, and community-based problem-solving, culminating in student-designed conservation projects.

The Young Environmentalists Society (Y.E.S.), founded in 2024 by a group of inspired teens, is a student-run organization supported by RHA. Through Y.E.S., students gain hands-on environmental leadership experience by organizing educational events, connecting with experts, leading community engagement efforts, and raising awareness of issues such as climate change, biodiversity, and water quality. These experiences help students build the skills, confidence, and relationships that shape their future careers and the well-being of their communities.

Together, ELA and Y.E.S. are fostering the next generation of conservation leaders!



ELA students learn about regenerative farming on Cold Brook Farm



ELA: Stream monitoring with RHA's Watershed Scientists

Our School Partnerships

RHA's Education team delivers engaging, meaningful environmental science through classroom lessons and field trips – all aligned with New Jersey's Next Generation Science Standards.

2025-26 School Year: 50 Schools
3038 Students • 16 Educators
17 Stream Study Sites



RHA educators loved their 11th summer spending time with enthusiastic kids from Greater Newark LifeCamp

Access to Nature for All

RHA's Access to Nature programs offer people with disabilities opportunities to experience the outdoors, build confidence and independence, and engage in nature-based learning, service, and art. Over the past year, we partnered with six public and private schools to provide life-skill programs for 50 students.



Young adults attend weekly Access to Nature programs

Preserving and Stewarding Land

Preserving and stewarding land is one of the most effective ways to protect clean water, wildlife habitat, and the Upper Raritan watershed's long-term resilience.

In 2026, RHA secured permanent preservation for 33 acres at Old Cold Brook Farm in Tewksbury Township through a conservation easement, protecting forests, wetlands, and critical headwater streams from future development. RHA also completed a deed restriction protecting an additional 56 acres in Peapack-Gladstone, a property that straddles the Peapack Brook and Middle Brook subwatersheds, helping protect the headwaters and natural lands that support water quality and habitat in both systems and ultimately in the broader Upper Raritan watershed region. Today, RHA owns and manages more than 450 acres of nature preserves, with an additional 939 acres permanently protected through conservation easements and deed restrictions.



33 acres preserved on Old Cold Brook Farm Tewksbury

Wildlife Conservation

Thriving wildlife populations depend on healthy land and water. RHA's wildlife conservation work combines habitat stewardship, land protection, nest-box programs, and volunteers to support biodiversity throughout the watershed.

2026 wildlife highlights:

- 13 active American Kestrel nest boxes
- 41 young kestrels banded, up from 28 the prior year
- 13 kestrel-program volunteers
- 42 bluebird nesting sites at Fairview Farm
- 59 bluebird fledglings



Banding fledgling kestrels Photo by Dallas Hetherington

Fairview Farm – A Preserve for Everyone

Accessibility to our programs for people living with disabilities has become an increasing focus for Raritan Headwaters.

In 2025 and 2026, RHA received funding to expand our accessible outdoor programming at Fairview Farm, including bird and wildlife observation, fishing, nature journaling, and more. Thanks to three grants from the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, E. J. Grassmann Trust, and the John and Margaret Post Foundation, we built a boardwalk and enhanced the dock overlooking the property's beautiful pond, making both accessible to people in wheelchairs.



Fairview Farm's new wheelchair-accessible boardwalk

Powered by Our Community

RHA's volunteers play a vital role in advancing our conservation mission by generously contributing their time, talents, and dedication to support the health of the watershed and the communities we serve.

RHA's 36th Annual Stream Cleanup

On April 18, 2026, at 71 sites, over 1100 volunteers picked up 43,000 pounds of trash and recyclables from stream banks and nearby green spaces throughout Morris, Somerset, and Hunterdon Counties.





Stream Cleanup at Far Hills Fairgrounds site

Stream Cleanup at Spruce Run site

2025-2026 Volunteer of the Year

Wynn Warren is our Suki Dewey Volunteer of the Year! In Spring 2025, Wynn reached out seeking an opportunity to learn about ecological field techniques and gain practical experience through our stewardship projects. Wynn spent over 250 hours in Summer 2025 and another 250 in 2026, working on invasive plant removal, native tree plantings, freshwater eel and American Kestrel monitoring, trail maintenance, volunteer coordination, rain barrel preparation, and many other tasks. Wynn was an invaluable asset to RHA's success, and we thank him for all his hard work and extraordinary dedication!



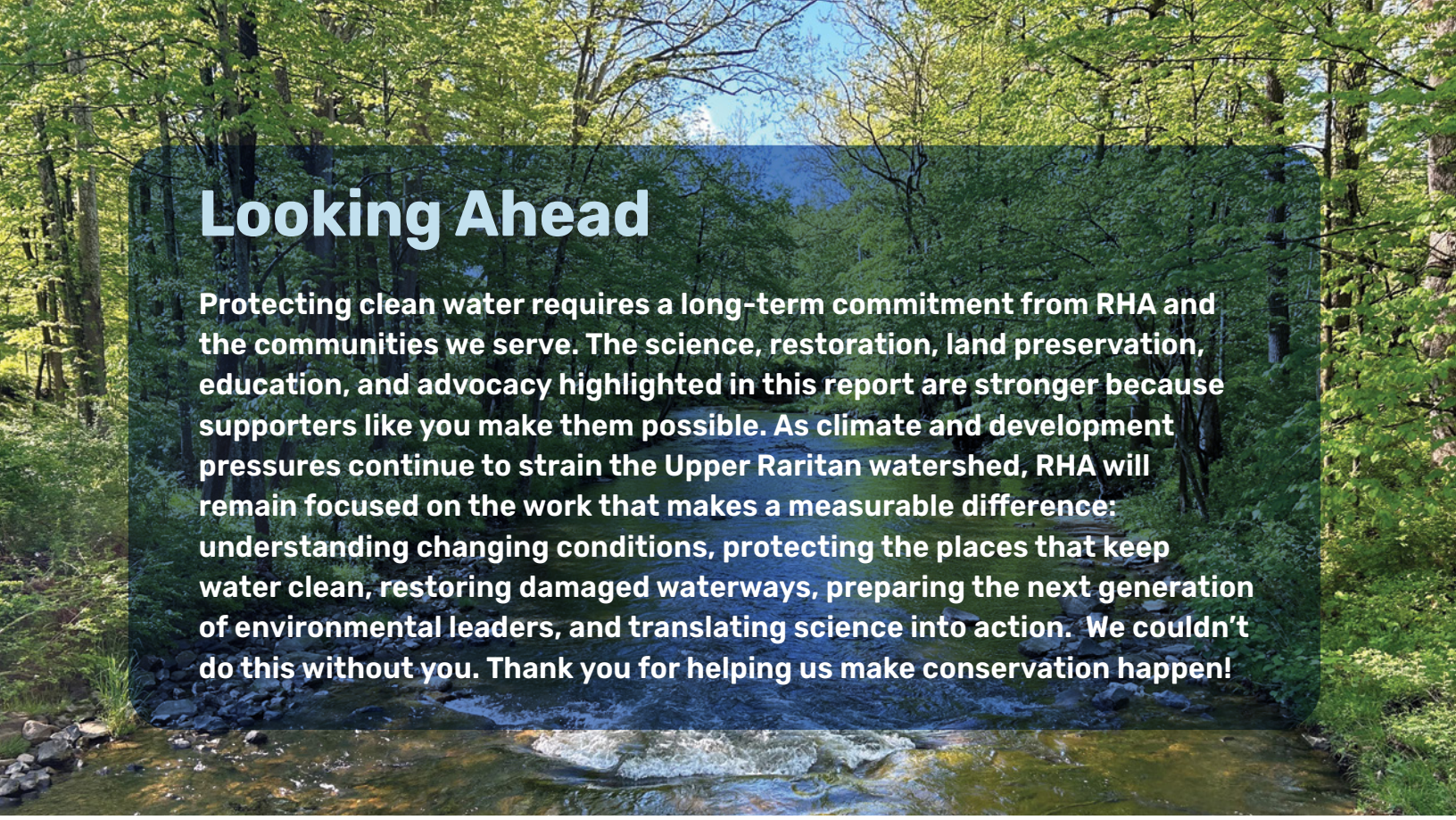
Wynn Warren, Volunteer of the Year



Spring 2026, 90 trained citizen scientist volunteers supported RHA's stream monitoring season



8 corporations provided over 200 volunteers for stewardship days, including this enthusiastic team from Johnson & Johnson

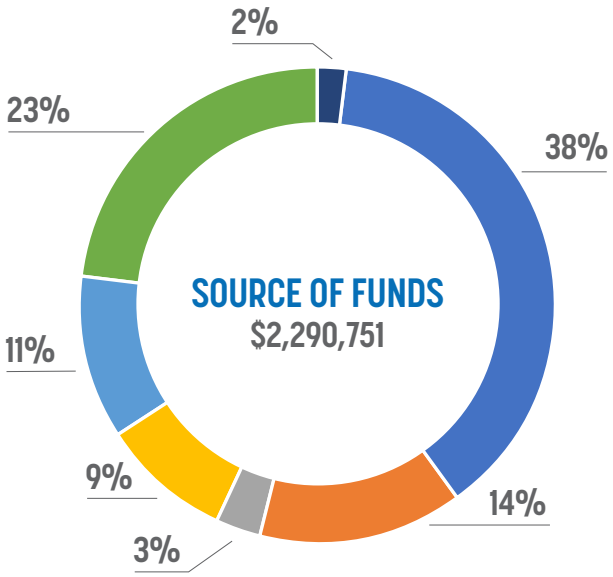


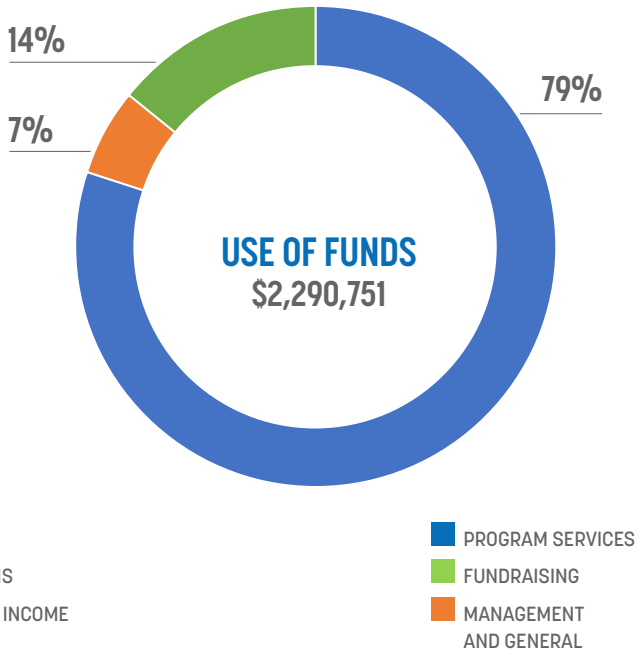
Looking Ahead

Protecting clean water requires a long-term commitment from RHA and the communities we serve. The science, restoration, land preservation, education, and advocacy highlighted in this report are stronger because supporters like you make them possible. As climate and development pressures continue to strain the Upper Raritan watershed, RHA will remain focused on the work that makes a measurable difference: understanding changing conditions, protecting the places that keep water clean, restoring damaged waterways, preparing the next generation of environmental leaders, and translating science into action. We couldn't do this without you. Thank you for helping us make conservation happen!

Fiscal Year January 1, 2025 – December 31, 2025

Raritan Headwaters Association is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) conservation organization that operates on a calendar year, beginning January 1 and ending December 31. Our accounts are audited annually by the accounting firm of James M. Wood, CPA. The following two graphs depict the Association's Functional Expenses and Support Revenue for the fiscal year ending December 31, 2025.





Thank you to each of our generous donors

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