

Congress sends Highlands bill to Bush

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WASHINGTON — A bill that passed Congress on Wednesday calls for spending \$110 million over the next decade to buy and preserve land in the Highlands region, which provides New Jersey and New York City with much of its drinking water.

The bill now goes to President Bush for his expected signature.

It doesn't require Congress to provide the full amount. But it does mean that lawmakers probably will allocate some money to protect the swath of verdant forests, trout streams and rolling hills that runs from Pennsylvania to Connecticut.

The House unanimously passed the bill Wednesday despite concerns about some technical changes made by the Senate last month.

The bill's chief sponsor, Rep.

Rodney Frelinghuysen, R-Hard- ing, worked the phones Tuesday to make sure there would be no last-minute hang-ups after a four-year effort to win protections for the Highlands.

"I said, 'I've worked too hard on this bill. I want to get this bill out,'" Frelinghuysen said. "And now it's out, and I'm really thrilled."

About 5,200 acres, an area more than one-third the size of Manhattan, is developed in the

Highlands every year. Environmentalists hope the federal designation will help stop state efforts to speed up development approvals for some areas of the Highlands.

Among the critical treasures environmental groups say are threatened by urban sprawl in New Jersey are the Fanny Highlands in Morris County, the Spar-ta Mountains in Sussex County and Scotts Mountain in Warren County.