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NEWS RELEASE

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Lessons from Hurricane Irene

A message from the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association

By: Jim Waltman, Executive Director

By any measure, Hurricane Irene was a monster. Like much of New Jersey, our watershed was hammered by rain, wind, power outages and flooding. Damages from flooding occurred in almost every corner of our 265-square-mile watershed and in all 26 towns within our region of central New Jersey. The boroughs were hit particularly hard, with large portions of Manville, Millstone and Hightstown under literally feet of water.

The Millstone River and Stony Brook both reached all-time record high levels in various places, each merging with the Delaware & Raritan Canal for a portion of their journeys, and numerous lakes spilled over their banks. Our hearts go out to the thousands of people who lost property, businesses or, worst of all, loved ones in this storm.

As we near the end of yet another wet week, those of us at the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association, central New Jersey's first environmental group, feel an even greater than usual urgency. While hurricane Irene was a true "outlier," an enormous storm that would have caused massive flooding and damage no matter what we did to prevent it, climate scientists are telling us that our region is most likely going to continue to get wetter and wetter (except of course during periods of prolonged drought, which are also likely to become more severe). This means unless we change our mindset, behaviors and policies, we may be living our future.

However, hope is not lost. Together we can make a difference:

First, we need to stop making the problem worse. Ill-conceived developments near streams and within wetlands, not only damage our supply of clean water and destroy important wildlife habitat, they also dramatically increase the risk of flood damage to homes and businesses.

Since 1949, the Watershed Association has sought to reverse that tide. In Cranbury, we are working closely with the Township Committee, Planning Board and Environmental Commission to secure a new ordinance to prohibit new development and the clearing of native vegetation near streams. We are working with Hopewell Township to secure a new ordinance to protect our forests, which help absorb and slowly release rain and

snow, and hold soil in place with deep root systems that stabilize streambanks and reduce erosion.

We also need to recommit ourselves to preserving open space along stream corridors and steep slopes as a means of both reducing floodwaters and keeping people out of harms way from future Irenes.

Second, we need to start fixing the mistakes of the past. Developments built before any significant regulation to contain stormwater can be retrofitted to retain runoff and allow it to percolate into our water supply. For example, the redevelopment of the Princeton Junction train station in West Windsor offers the opportunity to fix flooding issues there caused by acres and acres of impervious paved parking. In nearby Princeton we are working to investigate what can be done to reduce the flooding of Harry's Brook. It's not too late to correct past mistakes.

We also need to recognize that it makes sense to move or remove some structures that were built near water bodies and have been repeatedly damaged by flooding. The state's "Blue Acres" program, a cousin of the more familiar Green Acres program, provides funding to purchase such flood prone properties.

With bold action, we can prevent unmitigated development from contaminating and depleting our surface and ground water, and creating additional flood hazards. We wish those still suffering the aftermath of Hurricane Irene a quick and full recovery.

Interviews with Executive Director Jim Waltman are available upon request. Contact Communications Director Gwen McNamara at (609) 737-3735 x16 or gmcnamara@thewatershed.org to arrange an interview.

About the Watershed Association

The Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association is central New Jersey's first environmental group, protecting clean water and the environment through conservation, advocacy, science and education. Since 1949, the Watershed Association has served a 265-square-mile region drained by the Stony Brook and Millstone River and spanning 26 towns and five counties. To learn more, visit thewatershed.org.