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EPF underfunded say environmentalists

By Faith Burkins-Gimzek

DEC Commissioner Pete Grannis, right, and Executive Deputy Commissioner Stuart Gruskin testify about proposed budget cuts to the state Environmental Protection Funding at a joint Committee hearing on Environmental Conservation last week. Photo by Sarah L. Evans, The Legislative Gazette.

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State environmental advocacy groups condemned Gov. David A. Paterson's Executive Budget proposal for slashing \$69 million from the Environmental Protection Fund, imposing a moratorium on open space land acquisitions and reducing staff at the Department of Environmental Conservation and Office of Parks, Recreation and Historical Preservation.

The message from environmentalists focuses on the "disproportionate" nature of the cut to the EPF.

The Adirondack Council denounced Paterson's plan as a "declaration of war on New York's environment," and the New York League of Conservation Voters said the state's natural resources would face dire consequences if Paterson's budget is enacted.

Dave Gibson, executive director for Protect the Adirondacks, said "\$500 million over recent years has been taken from the fund. IOUs have been given back. The budget is saying those IOUs are worthless."

in 1993 as a dedicated fund to enact environmental priorities, preserve natural resources and to "provide mechanisms for open space conservation and land acquisition," according to the DEC.

The EPF is slated to receive \$143 million in the proposed budget, almost a 33 percent decrease from the last fiscal year. In 2009-2010, \$222 million was appropriated to the EPF in the enacted budget, but a deficit reduction plan was passed in a special session of the Legislature that reduced the amount to \$212 million.

"Cutting it nearly one-third is tremendous," said Dan Hendrick, communications director for the League of Conservation Voters. "It's the centerpiece of environmental funding...To take it back this far is a real concern to the environmental community."

The EPF, according to the budget summary, was created "to finance environmental programs, including farmland preservation, recycling programs, non-point source pollution control projects and municipal park and waterfront revitalization projects."

Cuts include:

- Almost \$12 million from the Farmland Protection Program, a reduction of more than 50 percent.
- \$2.8 million from municipal recycling grants.
- \$6.9 million from the Water Quality Improvement Program .
- \$8.8 million from municipal parks.
- \$12 million from Waterfront Revitalization grants.

Environmental advocates are most concerned with the largest proposed cut to the EPF's keystone program, open space land conservation. From the \$58.9 million allocated this year, it could be zeroed out altogether in next year's budget.

These cuts are partially offset by an additional \$35 million to the EPF for the purpose of funding new responsibilities not previously included in the EPF's mission.

"This is a budget that is aggressively hostile towards environmental programs in New York state," said Assemblyman Robert Sweeney, D-Lindenhurst, the Assembly Environmental Conservation Committee chair.

"The EPF was created to gain land; traditionally that's been one of the biggest categories. It's a slap to the face to environmental organizations," said Scott Lorey, legislative director for the Adirondack Council.

Hendrick expressed concern that without open space acquisition initiatives, development in the Catskill Mountains could affect the reservoirs that provide New York City with clean drinking water. "Open space protection is not only good for people, but a lot of those programs are vital to New York City's water," he said.

Sweeney said of the moratorium, "It's exactly the wrong thing to be doing right now." He said even if the state chooses not to purchase any additional land, it should fulfill its prior commitments to open space acquisition.

A day after Paterson's budget presentation, the governor announced the state will complete its purchase agreements for two Finger Lakes and land in the Catskills and Adirondack Park prior to the moratorium's enactment.

Gibson said of the state's agreement to purchase 89,000 acres of the Finch Pruyn working forest, "I was so pleased to see that. We have all been putting the right kind of pressure on the governor to do this. It's a great relief. The challenge is that the aggregated land is 161,000 acres.... This is phase one."

Gibson said his organization was also pleased to see \$25 million added to the EPF for state land stewardship and public access, a line item new this year. But Sweeney said this increase for land

stewardship and additional line items that have not historically been supported by the EPF, such as state payment of taxes for public land, and for park and historic site improvement, are a misappropriation totaling \$35 million.

"[Gov. Paterson] didn't just cut its funding significantly, he also added to it a significant number of programs which were never funded by the EPF — this is a double hit, lowering its funding and then using it to fund programs that don't belong... between the two, it comes close to making the EPF a joke," he said.