

Environmental groups blast Paterson's raid on funds

By Chris Morris, Contributing Writer

SARANAC LAKE — Environmental groups are fuming over Governor David Paterson's deficit-reduction plan, which aims to use funds earmarked for energy efficiency and environmental programs to close the state's budget gap.

Paterson aims to sweep \$90 million raised through the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative into the state's general fund. The initiative consists of 10-states that charge power plants for emissions of carbon dioxide. The proceeds from the program are supposed to be used for energy efficiency and sustainable energy programs.

And the raids on environmental funds don't end there. Paterson also wants to dip into the Environmental Protection Fund to the tune of \$10 million. That fund provides monies for projects like municipal landfill closure, water treatment plants and Forest Preserve land acquisition.

John Sheehan is a spokesman for the Adirondack Council, a not-for-profit environmental group based in upstate New York. He says enviro groups are disappointed that Paterson is raiding these funds before the money can be used for its intended purpose.

"This was supposed to be money that was collected during the auction of carbon allowances to power plants and then these revenues were going to go into a fund to help develop cleaner energy, energy conservation programs and green jobs," Sheehan said. "And the whole idea here was to stimulate the economy while also improving the environment and improving public health."

Sheehan says Paterson's raid on the money is illogical, because the funds were meant to save costs in the long term.

"Cutting this money makes absolutely no sense whatsoever," he said. "This is money that will save us money down the road by helping to wean us off of a very expensive fossil fuel system that is essentially bankrupting us by keeping us at the mercy of foreign oil producers."

These raids on environmental protection funds shouldn't come as too much of a surprise. Last November, Paterson grabbed \$50 million from the same fund.

Sheehan estimates that since 2003, the state has siphoned \$500 million from the Environmental Protection Fund. And in every instance, the money was used for non-environmental purposes.

"Why this has become his favorite piggy bank to smash and take all the money from is beyond us, other than the environmental community has not stood up and spoken out against it," he said.

"And the folks who are also benefiting on the local level haven't expressed their disappointment with the state at having essentially reneged on their word when they passed the budget back on April 1."

Legislators are expected to hold statewide public hearings this week to discuss Paterson's proposed cuts. Sheehan hopes that hearings will be slated in the Adirondacks so residents can speak out against the cuts.

In many cases, the funds would have helped municipalities pay for mandated landfill closures and the creation of recycling centers.

Sheehan says it's the state's responsibility to help fund mandated projects for towns and villages that don't have the excess revenue to afford them otherwise.

"Frankly, the state's obligation is to help the smaller, less wealthy communities deal with mandates like this," Sheehan said. "We're very much in favor of seeing this money spent in the Adirondacks because it not only helps the environment, but it takes pressure off local governments to come up with money for projects that are very unaffordable in communities of two and three thousand people."

Before Paterson's raid of environmental protection funds, the governor also announced mid-year budget reductions throughout the state. The Adirondack Park Agency and the state Department of Environmental Conservation both suffered setbacks due to those cuts.