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## State Looks to Slash Environmental Funds, Cap Land Purchases

As New Yorkers weigh the repercussions of Governor David Paterson's 2010-2011 Executive Budget, environmental officials are fuming over the massive proposed cuts to environmental and conservation programs.

The Governor's preliminary budget calls for a two-year moratorium on new land acquisitions in the Adirondacks, as well as further cuts to the state's Environmental Protection Fund.

Brian Houseal is executive director of the environmental advocacy group the Adirondack Council. He says the cuts Paterson is proposing are – quote – “way out of proportion with cuts being made to other areas of the state budget.”

“This budget plan will cause instant and irreversible harm to the environment in general, and to the Adirondacks in particular,” Houseal said.

John Sheehan is spokesman for the Adirondack Council.

“This is a terrible budget for the environment,” he said. “The dedicated money set up for the environment is essentially being diverted to non-environmental purposes in a way we think is not consistent with state law.”

Houseal said that Paterson should stop lumping issues like clean water, clean air and healthy food in with “special interests.”

As for the cap on state land purchases, Adirondack Council Legislative Director Scott Lorey told WNBZ he was – quote – “disappointed with the proposed moratorium.”

“We're hopeful that working with the state Legislature we can convince them that future land acquisition purchases are important, not only to the ecology of the state but to the economic well-being of the state and the Adirondacks,” Lorey said. “So we're confident that as this budget process moves forward, things will change with the Governor's proposed budget.”

Lorey said the council will testify before the Legislature during a budget hearing next week. He hopes to lay out before lawmakers the full impact of Paterson's plan to cut \$69 million from the Environmental Protection Fund.

“Last year it was at \$212 million and he's proposed even less than that,” Lorey added. “We were hoping for closer to \$300 million, that's where we thought we'd be a couple of years ago and we're now at less than half of that. And it's not just about land acquisitions; it's about recycling, it's about solid waste facilities, it's about parks. There's a lot of different programs out there that will be hurt by the Governor's proposed cuts.”

Connie Prickett of the Adirondack Nature Conservancy says her group is upset with Paterson's proposal to move away from the state's long-term commitment to environmental protection.

As far as the budget's impact on land acquisition, Prickett says it's difficult to read into the future.

"We don't know a lot of details," she said. "But we're certainly concerned and we think it's really unfortunate that the percentage of the cut to the EPF is 33 percent off last year's budget, and yet the EPF only makes up less than one percent of the state's entire budget."

In the coming weeks, Prickett says the conservancy will work with the Friends of the Environment Coalition to assure that the land acquisition funds are restored.

The Nature Conservancy is currently holding onto 50,000-plus acres of former Finch Pruyn timberland.

Not everyone is upset with Paterson's land purchase moratorium. Fred Monroe is executive director of the Adirondack Local Government Review Board.

"We had worked on a policy document that had proposed a three-year moratorium, and this is a two year," he said. "And we wanted the state to use that time to look at the entire land acquisition program and pay attention to the economic impact on communities."

The Adirondack Council's Brian Houseal says the state EPF is supposed to contain a specific amount of money per year. That helps environmental agencies set their budgets.

Local legislators like Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward and state Senator Betty Little have been calling for an end to state land purchases for years.

-Chris Morris, 1-21-10