

Environmental funding lower in budget plan

By PETE KLEIN, Staff Reporter

ALBANY—The scrambling for state dollars, derived from taxes, continues.

Environmental groups are calling Governor David Paterson's Executive Budget plan a declaration of war on New York's environment that guts programs designed to prevent pollution, protect clean water, prevent cancer, save dwindling local farmland and working forests and create parks.

"These cuts are massive and way out of proportion with cuts being made to other areas of the state budget," says Brian L. Houseal, executive director of The Adirondack Council, an environmental research, education and advocacy organization.

"This budget plan will cause instant and irreversible harm to the environment in general, and to the Adirondacks in particular."

PROPOSED CUTS

Paterson's budget plan calls for:

- cutting the Environmental Protection Fund by \$69 million, although, Houseal argues, "the Real Estate Transfer Tax established to fund it in 1993 collected more than enough revenue to avoid any cuts;"
- a \$6.9 million cut in the Water Quality Improvement Program;
- eliminating 10 staff at the Adirondack Park Agency (from 69 positions to 59);
- eliminating 54 staff at the Department of Environmental Conservation (down to 3,314);
- closing the Adirondack Park Agency's visitor interpretive centers in Paul Smiths and Newcomb;
- a \$12 million cut in Farmland Protection Program statewide (there are 620 family farms in the Adirondack Park);
- a \$12 million cut in Waterfront Revitalization grants;
- zero dollars for breast cancer research (down from \$450,000 in 2009-10); and
- a \$2.8 million cut in municipal recycling grants.

“On top of all that,” says Houseal, “Governor Paterson proposed removing an additional \$5 million from the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), a capital-projects-only account, diverting the money to pay taxes to local governments on state-owned lands.

“The state has paid those taxes from its General Fund since 1886.”

SET BY LAW

The EPF is supposed to contain a set amount of money each year so environmental agencies and other groups have a sense of how much funding to expect, explained Houseal.

It was required by law to be \$300 million last year, but the governor proposed only \$205 million. The Legislature added back about \$17 million before the budget was passed and the final amount for 2009-10 was \$222 million.

This year, the governor is proposing \$143 million, or less than half of the \$300 million that state law says should be appropriated for the fund.