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Forty years of progress, but DEC commissioner says fight isn't over yet

By ANDREW BEAM, Gazette staff writer

On top of Prospect Mountain, set against a backdrop overlooking a clear and sunny view of Lake George, Department of Environmental Conservation Commissioner Pete Grannis outlined 40 years of environmental successes in the Adirondack Park.

“You couldn't have gotten a better setting, this is an extraordinary part of Earth Week,” Grannis said of the view on April 19. “The Adirondack Park, everybody recognizes as an American treasure, and it's our task, all of us, to preserve and protect it for the millions of visitors and for the tens of thousands of families who call it home and work in the park.”

In celebration of the 40th anniversary of Earth Day, which coincides with the creation of the DEC, Grannis visited Hempstead Harbor in Long Island the day before and Onondaga Lake in Syracuse and Turning Point Park in Rochester the same week, discussing recent environmental progress in each area.

Grannis described his participation in the movement to establish Earth Day in New York City in 1970 when environmental advocates expressed anger over then-Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller's lack of attention to conservation and health issues.

“It was a citizen movement that really drove a national agenda,” Grannis said of the efforts that eventually saw the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the DEC.

During the press conferences, topics such as acid rain contamination of Adirondack lakes, the return of wildlife to the north country and the closure of landfills in the Adirondack region were discussed.

“Acid rain levels are dropping steadily,” said Grannis. “The most recent analysis found that every one of the 48 lakes in the Adirondacks that we monitor on a long-term basis show reductions in sulfate and nitrate and 28 of those show acid level improvements.”

He added that the average number of fish species went up by 33 percent since the mid 1980s.

Highlighting other successes, Grannis said 82 unlined landfills have been shut down in DEC Region 5, which includes counties such as Warren, Franklin, Saratoga, and Hamilton. The DEC has also, under conservation easements, protected more than 700,000 acres of Adirondack lands and have championed a Junior Naturalist Program, which Grannis said has “connected 100,000 youngsters to the wonders of the Adirondacks.”

A climate action plan, which calls for the state to reduce carbon emissions by 80 percent by the year 2050, is being drafted by the Climate Action Council, which Grannis will co-chair with New York State Energy Research and Development Authority President and CEOP Francis J. Murray.

“I think [climate change] is probably the most pressing priority the state is facing,” said Grannis, who said rising ocean levels is one of the main problems brought on by climate change.

While Grannis acknowledges the agency lost almost 400 of its staff during the 2009-2010 fiscal year, many from the environmental community have praised the EC for its efforts in caring for the state’s environment despite the loss of manpower.

“We should all be deeply indebted to our colleagues at the DEC, the men and women who are the stewards and protectors of our statewide waters, forests, air and everything that’s environmental,” said Adirondack Council Executive Director Brian Houseal who spoke atop Prospect Mountain.

EPA Region 2 Administrator Judith Enck, who oversees New York New Jersey, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, praised the DEC for the work it has done with such limited resources.

“I think the DEC has made tremendous progress in cleaning up pollution across the state,” she said, “but this is a particularly challenging time for them with this significantly reduced funding.”

Enck went on to say that as an administrator in the EPA, she is going to do what she can to bring more federal funding to the agency because it is important to preserve the air and water.

“This is a fairly perilous time for people who want to breathe clean air at this time,” she added.

While celebrating Earth Day lobby day, Environmental Advocates of New York Executive Director Robert Moore said the DEC is doing a great job, but the agency faces an uphill battle.

“To sum it up, Commissioner Grannis and the DEC are being forced to fight with one hand tied behind their back,” said Moore.

Grannis acknowledged there is still more work left to be done.

“It is certainly not time to hoist the ‘Mission Accomplished’ banner,” Grannis said, “not by a long shot.”