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Green groups decry governor's proposed cuts

By CHRIS KNIGHT, Enterprise Senior Staff Writer

Environmental groups say Gov. David Paterson's proposal to reduce the state's deficit by \$5 billion over two years will cut critical environmental programs.

As part of his deficit reduction plan, Paterson plans to raid \$90 million of the projected \$220 million in proceeds from the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative's auction of carbon allowances. The money, which had been targeted for energy efficiency and conservation programs, would instead be placed in the state's general fund.

Adirondack Council spokesman John Sheehan said the move is unprecedented.

"I don't think this has ever happened before where the state has raided money from a dedicated fund before using a penny of it for its intended purpose," he said. "That's quite a precedent to set and one the public should be alarmed about."

Sheehan said his group could have legal standing to file a lawsuit against the state since it used its own funds to buy carbon allowances at the auctions.

"When we did that, we had an expectation of where the money would go because it was state law," Sheehan said. "Now, before any of it has been spent, the governor is proposing that they change the purpose entirely."

A coalition of environmental groups issued a press release calling the raid shortsighted and desperate.

"Instead of using the money to reduce utility bills for businesses and consumers, the governor is throwing this money into the black hole that is New York's general fund," said Jackson Morris of Environmental Advocates of New York.

"The nation's first-ever plan to reduce global warming pollution should not be used as the governor's piggy bank," said Richard Schrader, New York legislative director at the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, designed to limit carbon dioxide emissions from electric power plants, isn't the only environmental program Paterson wants to cut.

Another \$10 million would be taken from the Environmental Protection Fund, which is used to pay for recycling projects, land acquisition, municipal landfill closure, water quality projects and other environmental programs. It's the second time in a year Paterson has taken money from the EPF; \$50 million was swept from the fund in November 2008.

Sheehan said the additional loss of funding could make it more difficult for the state to complete large land transactions in the Adirondacks, including the purchase of the former Finch, Pruyn lands and the Follensby Pond tract from the Adirondack Nature Conservancy.

"Not providing for those is a serious problem given the fact that The Nature Conservancy and other land-saving organizations have made commitments well above their ability to carry them long term, essentially on the advice of the state that they intended to buy these lands," Sheehan said.

Paterson's deficit reduction plan also includes funding cuts to Medicaid, schools, municipalities and transportation programs. When it was announced last week, Paterson acknowledged it would lead to "hard and painful" choices.

"During a time of uncommon difficulty, we need to work together for the common good and enact a consensus plan that helps avoid the severe consequences face by other states that failed to swiftly address their budget problems," Paterson said.

The state Assembly and Senate have scheduled a series of hearings on Paterson's deficit reduction plan.

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