

N.J. environmental groups accuse Gov. Christie of 'raiding' funds for clean air, water

By Brian T. Murray/The Star-Ledger

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AP Photo/Carmine Galasso/The Record Fall foliage at the Monksville Reservoir in West Milford in the Highlands. Environmental groups today accused Gov. Chris Christie of attacking the environment by "raiding" the Highlands Council budget and other funds dedicated to the environment.

TRENTON -- State environmental groups today accused Gov. Chris Christie of attacking the environment by "raiding" the state's Clean Energy Fund, the Highlands Council budget and other coffers dedicated to clean air and water protections.

Christie declared a fiscal state of emergency today and, in an effort to close a \$2.2 billion budget deficit, cut \$9 million in aid for the Department of Environmental Protection, \$1.7 million for state parks and \$500,000 for the Pinelands Commission.

In addition, he took \$18 million in existing funds from the Highlands Council which controls development in seven northern New Jersey counties. The money had been given to the council by Public Service Electric & Gas last June to preserve land in exchange for the council approving a project to expand 240 electric towers along the Susquehanna-Roseland power line stretching 44 miles from the Delaware River to Essex County.

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Environmental groups oppose the line, which won another approval today by the state Board of Public Utilities.

"This was money committed to the towns in the Highlands. It's a direct assault on the Highlands," said Julia Somers of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, a watchdog group.

Jeff Tittel of the New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club, said Highlands protection efforts are now losing millions of dollars while the region is forced to host a power line project that will use electrical energy derived from coal-burning plants that pollute the air.

"Governor Christie sold out the environment today," Tittel said.

Tittel also chided the governor for taking another \$158 million in existing funds from the Clean Energy Fund operated by the BPU.

The program gets about \$269 million a year from surcharges on ratepayers to finance energy efficiency improvements in businesses and homes, including installation of solar panels and windmills. The program is credited with building alternative energy markets, and creating jobs.

"This is not money for the state to use on general programs," said Matt Elliott of Environment New Jersey. "This raid represents about half of what Clean Energy money is available this year. We now will be doing less solar projects and less retrofitting of houses for energy efficiency."

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