



N.J. environmentalists urge Gov. Chris Christie's support for Highlands preservation

By Lawrence Ragonese/The Star-Ledger

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AP Photo/Carmine Galasso/The Record Fall foliage at the Monksville Reservoir in West Milford. New Jersey environmentalists are calling on Gov. Chris Christie to show support for preservation of the North Jersey Highlands, saying the state's new chief executive is "sending mixed messages" on the issue.

In a letter to Christie today, the Highlands Coalition, representing more than 40 groups, wrote they are "alarmed" by Christie's decision to cut operating funds for the Highlands Council and reduce money needed to help implement the council's regional master plan.

"On one hand he says he understands the importance of protecting the State's water supply, but then on the other, he strips the council of the funds towns need to plan to protect Highlands waters," wrote coalition executive director Julia Somers.

"We call on him to make clear his support for the Highlands Council, its plan and work."

Environmentalists are especially concerned by the cut of \$18.5 million from the Highlands Protection Fund and reduction of \$88,000 from the Highland Council's operating budget.

But Christie, through a spokesman, stressed his commitment to preservation.

"It would be wrong to assume the governor's pledge to protect water and natural resources in New Jersey is diminished in any way by the painful budget decisions he had to make," said spokesman

Michael Drewniak. "We were trying to strike a balance, while dealing with a \$2.2 billion mid-year budget deficit.

"Across virtually every state government operation and program, we looked for surpluses and carryover balances. We wish circumstances were different, but this is what we confronted and had to deal with in a very short window since taking office a month ago."

The Highlands fund was designed to offer grants to towns to finance planning needed to allow them conform to the regional master plan, and also help determine the feasibility of accepting denser growth in a transfer of development rights program.

"It's a cynical way to get rid of the Highlands law," said New Jersey Sierra Club Director Jeff Tittel, referring to Christie's cuts. "He takes away money to help towns study conformance to the Highlands plan and then issues an executive order saying towns don't have to comply with unfunded state mandates."

Meanwhile, environmentalists today urged the governor to fill ten seats on the Highlands Council that are vacant or held by people whose terms have expired, while urging Christie to establish a stable source of funding for open space and farmland preservation.

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