



N.J. Assemblyman McKeon blasts Gov. Christie on freezing Highlands funding

By Jim Lockwood/The Star-Ledger

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AP Photo/Carmine Galasso/The

RecordFall foliage at the Monksville Reservoir in West Milford.

A main sponsor of the legislation that created the Highlands region in northern New Jersey blasted Gov. Chris Christie's decision to freeze Highlands funding.

State Assemblyman John McKeon, (D-Essex), who sponsored the Highlands Act in 2004, issued a statement yesterday criticizing the GOP governor for "raiding" Highlands, saying it's "a shortsighted move that could lead to a shortage of clean water."

"These funds are necessary to continue the implementation of the Highlands Regional Master Plan to ensure the protection and preservation of our state's valuable water resources in a sustainable and planned manner in the region," said McKeon, who also is chairman of the Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee.

The sentiments echoed those of the Highlands Coalition of more than 40 environmental groups who on Tuesday urged Christie to show support for preserving the Highlands and not "send mixed messages" on the issue.

But Christie spokesman Michael Drewniak — as he did Tuesday in response to the coalition — again stressed the governor's 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. We were trying to strike a balance, while dealing with a \$2.2 billion mid-year budget deficit," Drewniak said. "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 is the source of drinking water for some 5.4 million people in 15 counties, or more than half of population of the state, and the Highlands Act allocated nearly \$30 million in dedicated funding, McKeon said. Under the fiscal emergency declared by Christie on Feb. 11, he froze more than \$18.5 million from the Highlands Protection Fund for defraying costs for 88 municipalities and seven counties of implementing a regional master plan.

McKeon said another \$13.2 million was "raided" in tax stabilization funds for compensating municipalities for lower taxes on vacant land if they prove the land declined in value due to Highlands development restrictions. McKeon contends the Highlands funds have been put in reserve until June 30, when they would lapse into the state's general budget coffers, but Christie also can "unfreeze" them.

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