

Environmentalists launch campaign against proposal to put septic systems in Highlands

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Environmentalists and some lawmakers have launched a campaign to overturn a proposal by the Christie administration that would allow more than 1,100 more septic systems in some of the most environmentally sensitive areas of the Highlands.

A resolution has been introduced in the Assembly that seeks to block the proposed rules that environmentalists say is the biggest threat to date to the 12-year-old law protecting a region that provides drinking water for millions.

A coalition of advocacy groups plan to hold a meeting Monday at Montclair State University to gather more comments in opposition to the rules particularly from residents and officials who live outside of the Highlands but depend upon water from the region's many reservoirs.

"The DEP is taking the side of a very narrow group of interested parties who want to further develop the area," said Elliott Ruga, policy director of the advocacy group The Highlands Coalition. "This is fundamentally contrary to the Highlands Act and there is no legitimate reason to do this."

Department of Environmental Protection officials said Wednesday that the criticism was overblown. They said the potential for 1,145 new septic systems better reflected the amount of development the Highlands region could handle without degrading water quality based on new data taken since the Highlands Act became law in 2004.

The proposed changes, DEP officials said, were made in response to a 2008 lawsuit by the New Jersey Farm Bureau. Farmers had long argued that the region's septic densities — one unit per 88 acres on forested land and one unit per 25 acres in open space — were too restrictive and robbed them of the value of their land.

Among supporters of the rule changes is the New Jersey Builders Association, which says more septic systems will help spur growth.

"The current septic standards inhibit economic growth, which in turn frustrated the 'balance' that the Highlands Act was to strike with environmental protection," said Dwight Pittenger, president of the association.

Opponents argue the changes would drastically increase development in the Preservation Area of the Highlands, the most protected area of the region, encompassing 415,000 acres in seven northern counties, including parts of Bergen, Passaic and Morris.

Environmentalists came out in force last month at a DEP hearing to voice opposition to the rule changes. The DEP extended the public comment period to July 15, but did not grant a second public hearing that advocates wanted.

Ruga said Monday night's event was a de-facto "public hearing" in that all the comments made against the rules would be transcribed and sent to the DEP. Monday's meeting will be held at Montclair State University's Center for Environmental and Life Sciences, Room 120 at 6 p.m.

Meanwhile a resolution, ACR192, to block the proposed rules is slowly making its way through Trenton. The measure, sponsored by Assembly Democrats John McKeon and Grace Spencer, says the proposed rules are inconsistent with the Highlands Act. A companion bill has yet to be introduced in the Senate.

The resolution is similar to one that passed the Assembly last month seeking to block new DEP rules that would ease building restrictions in flood-prone areas.