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Environmentalists Balk at Possible Cuts to Highlands Protection

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In testimony before a State Assembly committee Monday, environmentalists were among several expert witnesses who spoke against Governor Christie's proposed cuts to a program designed to protect the drinking water supply of more than 5 million New Jersey residents.

Assembly Democrats are trying to reverse the new administration's budget-crunching direction on the argument that even in the toughest budget times certain programs shouldn't be reduced.

Assemblyman John McKeon, the chairman of the chamber's Environment and Solid Waste Committee, said cuts to the Highlands Protection Fund could be devastating.

"The loss of land and water resources in the Highlands would be permanent and irreversible. The environment should not be mortgaged for a quick fix," McKeon (D-Essex) said in a statement released by his office.

McKeon and other Assembly Democrats oppose the administration's plan to freeze \$31 million to the Highlands Council, including \$18 million for the Highlands Protection Fund. The fund is designed to help dozens of municipalities defray the costs of protecting the water supply. The state compensates municipalities for lost tax revenue by not developing land in the Highlands.

In testimony Monday Julia Somers, the executive director of the Highlands Coalition, said the state would regret scaling back the funding.

"The governor's actions, stripping Highlands funding, will cut the potential of our protecting the state's water supply by 50 percent," Somers testified. "Is that really something the state can afford to do? Losing any portion of that water supply will cost the state billions of dollars to replace in the future."

She said towns would no longer be able to afford to participate in a Regional Master Plan which is designed to protect the area near the drinking water from development.

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