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New Jersey's red tape review group suggests getting rid of two environmental orders

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BY SCOTT FALLON

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STAFF WRITER

Buried in the state's Red Tape Review Group's report is a call to rescind several executive orders, including one that provides extra protections to the Highlands.

The recommendations to Governor Christie have alarmed environmentalists who say the executive order issued by former Gov. Jon S. Corzine is essential.

"I hope these suggestions stay as suggestions," said Julia Somers, head of the Highlands Coalition, a group of environmental advocates.

The report, issued this week by the group led by Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno, recommended everything from eliminating several state boards to pulling back "antiquated" rules.

It also called for rescinding executive orders from as far back as Gov. Jim Florio that "confuse or impede New Jersey's economic growth strategies." The report lists dozens of orders in the last few pages of the 130-page report.

Executive Order 114, signed by Corzine in September 2008, was a sweeping directive designed to close loopholes in the Highlands Regional Master Plan — the preservation blueprint for the 860,000-acre region that includes mountainous portions of Bergen, Passaic and Morris counties and generates water for millions of state residents.

In the order, Corzine directed the Department of Environmental Protection to restrict permits in areas where there is already groundwater shortage.

Of the 183 pockets of water in the region, 114 were running at a deficit at the time of the executive order. That means not enough rainwater was being absorbed into the ground to recharge aquifers — the result of too much concrete, asphalt and other impervious surfaces.

The executive order "strengthened things that the regional master plan missed," Somers said. "It's very important."

Administration officials said they chose to rescind Executive Order 114 because a section of it that deals with affordable housing mandates is redundant. But those officials could not speak to the aquifer protections late Thursday.

Christie did not address the executive orders at a news conference Monday following the release

of the report. He said he would look to eliminate rules that add additional costs to businesses and consumers without providing "any real benefit" to the public.

"It doesn't mean we're going to eliminate every regulation in New Jersey, far from it, but what it means is the ones that, to us, that make no sense, we think it's time to get rid of," Christie said.

The report also lists Executive Order 131, which extends the life of the DEP's Environmental Justice Advisory Council, to be rescinded.

But an administration official Thursday said it was put on the list by mistake.

The DEP considers a portion of Ringwood an environmental justice community due to toxic contamination from the dumping of paint sludge from the former Ford Motor Co. plant in Mahwah.

Staff Writer John Reitmeyer contributed to this article. E-mail: fallon@northjersey.com

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