



N.J. Highlands group urges Christie to protect 'drinking water for 5.4 million people'

By Jim Lockwood/**The Star-Ledger**

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Matt Rainey/The Star-Ledger

A man works on his watercolor painting at Spruce Run Reservoir in Clinton Twp. in this file photo of the Highlands region.

It was an Earth Day shot fired across Gov. Chris Christie's bow.

The Highlands Coalition of 45 environmental organizations in New Jersey used the occasion of today's 40th annual Earth Day to send Christie a not-so-subtle message: "Protect the Highlands, the source of drinking water for 5.4 million people."

The governor has voiced support for the Highlands during last year's campaign and since taking office, but so far has diverted its funding and has not filled vacancies on the Highlands Council that oversees that region, said the coalition. It believes Christie has sent "mixed messages" and wants him to be an unambiguous advocate for the Highlands.

"Our coalition is very concerned that the governor has not yet taken steps to advance the conservation and protection of these resources," said coalition executive director Julia Somers. "He hasn't made appointments to the council and he hasn't come out against inappropriate development in the Highlands region."

Christie spokesman Michael Drewniak replied, "What's wrong in these critical remarks is the built-in assumption that the governor does not care about the Highlands watershed or conservation of that area of New Jersey. That is just plain wrong. Unfortunately, there's hardly an interest group or advocacy group that received state funding that didn't have it cut, in some cases dramatically. These are difficult times — to put it mildly — and all funding will be reassessed and prioritized once our revenues increase, reform is put in place and we stabilize our fiscal position. We will also continue to look closely to determine whether the previous structure and roles of funded organizations were effective and efficient."

The coalition statement also is a response to what it views as "alarming" developments from Christie geared toward weakening environmental rules and regulations, including his transition-team report, executive orders and this week's 'Red Tape' report that suggests getting rid of the Highlands Council.

"They all take the biased position that our economic ills can be cured by getting rid of regulations," said Michele Byers of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation. "I think there's a sense of alarm. There's a willingness of environmentalists to give the governor time to get established, to use thoughtful and strategic thinking, but the reports are not thoughtful or strategic. It's take the ax out. We really would like the governor to stand up, make some proclamations and take a stand on the Highlands, the environment and water, and future of our state."

In contrast, state Sen. Michael Doherty, (R-Warren), is calling for the Highlands Act to be abolished because he says it's unnecessary, tramples landowner rights and stifles the economy. "For these folks (environmentalists) to continue to beat this drum is ridiculous," Doherty said. "The number one priority for most people is jobs."

Since 2005, a total of \$16 million has been allocated to the Highlands Council to implement the Highlands Act and develop the Highlands Regional Master Plan, which includes a \$2.2 million operating budget this fiscal year. Another \$26.4 million has been set aside for grants to municipalities and counties for planning activities to conform to the master plan. However, some \$18 million of that \$26.4 million that was as-yet unencumbered funds were held in reserve by Christie earlier this year due to the state's budget crisis.

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