

Opinion – The Unkindest Cut - Why Is Environmental Funding Cut First During A Budget Crisis?

By Paul King, Interim President, Pennsylvania Environmental Council

(This op-ed piece appeared in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette on December 24 and was reprinted in the PA Environment Digest, December 26.)

38 years since the first Earth Day, after making tremendous progress in cleaning up our water, our air, and protecting our natural resources, funding for the environment is often considered optional by the General Assembly and the Governor.

Over the last several years, more than \$784 million in environmental funding has been diverted to balance the state budget or to provide funding for programs that could not get funding on their own.

Most recently last week, Governor Rendell proposed to take \$174 million from the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to balance the budget; money it earned by leasing state forest land to companies drilling for natural gas in the Marcellus Shale formation and earmarked for state park and forest land improvements.

While this is the largest single diversion, there have been many others—

- \$324 million intended to support wastewater plant operations over the last six years to balance the budget;
- \$100 million in 2002 from the Underground Storage Tank cleanup insurance fund to balance the budget (although this is slowly being repaid over 10 years);
- \$52.7 million “one-time” diversion from the Keystone Recreation, Parks and Conservation Fund in 2006 to balance the budget;
- \$50 million in 2007 and 2008 from the Environmental Stewardship Fund, which supports mine reclamation and watershed restoration, to fund the Hazardous Sites Cleanup Program because there was no agreement on how to fund that program;
- \$50 million in 2007 and 2008 from the Environmental Stewardship Fund to pay debt service on the Growing Greener II bond issue and taking funding away from restoration projects each year for the next 25 years – reflecting a pattern of only environmental programs being required to address their own bond debt service;
- \$15 million from the Recycling Fund in 2008 to balance the budget; and
- \$18.4 million that was just put into budgetary reserve from the Department of Environmental Protection and Department of Conservation and Natural Resources that will further cut their staff.

Luckily in 2007 a coalition of community, recreation, and environmental groups beat back a proposal from Senate Republicans and the Governor to use another \$40 million from the Keystone Recreation, Parks and Conservation Fund to balance the budget.

To his credit, Governor Rendell has made several proposals to increase environmental funding through fees on waste and toxic substances, but no political consensus could be achieved to actually put those into law. And the state has advanced a tremendous new energy investment program, although intended investments may have to be delayed until next year due to the current economic climate.

Pennsylvania has been robbing Peter to pay for every other Tom, Dick and Harry program in the face of budget issues that are not as bad as the ones we face this year.



With Pennsylvania expecting the federal government to provide billions of dollars for green infrastructure improvements, the General Assembly and the Governor should not be cutting the environmental budget, but sustaining it to meet current opportunities and demands.

Because of past budget cuts, state agencies now lack the staff to review the hundreds of permits needed to actually build all that infrastructure. How will Pennsylvania come up with funds to meet matching requirements of the federal Farm Bill and any pending infrastructure investment program if we keep cutting them?

Pennsylvanians have shown repeatedly they support environmental funding, most recently in November when they approved a \$400 million bond issue for water infrastructure improvements by a resounding 62 percent.

But more importantly, environmental programs create jobs, benefit citizens and communities, and generate real economic returns. Clean water and air, energy efficiency, alternative energy development, and restoring our environment should not be considered optional. They are the keys to the Commonwealth's economic future.

While the realities of the economic downturn should inform any action, we cannot afford to sacrifice all of the gains to be made from responding to very real opportunities and needs.

NewsClips: [Unkindest Cut: Environmental Funding Shouldn't Be First Target In Budget Crisis](#)

[Op-Ed: A Chance For PA To Invest In Its Green Infrastructure](#)

The **Pennsylvania Environmental Council** protects and restores the natural and built environments through innovation, collaboration, education and advocacy. PEC believes in the value of partnerships with the private sector, government, communities and individuals to improve the quality of life for all Pennsylvanians. Learn more at [the PEC website](#).