Despite the passage of visionary environmental laws in New Jersey such as Pinelands, Safe Drinking Water, Right to Know, Superfund and Wetlands, or more recently Open Space, Clean Car, Highlands, Global Warming, and Clean Water laws, we find ourselves on the brink of disaster.

Open space continues to be gobbled up by sprawl; drinking water is increasingly polluted, scarce, and more expensive; and our energy reliance is unhealthy, unsafe and a key contributor to global warming. And yet Governor Corzine and the State Legislature are considering unprecedented weakening of existing protections and falling to advance much needed stronger protections. Listed below are just the top 7:

1. The “Permit Extension Act”—introduced by State Senator Sarlo (D-Bergen) and Assemblyman Greenwald (D-Camden) in late May, hoping for quick passage in June—would allow all developers’ state and local permits and approvals for up to 9 years, even those that expired more than 2 years ago. It allowed, developers can avoid improved environmental protections, public health standards, building codes or local zoning. This is the latest albeit most serious effort since “Fast Track” by special interests to gut environmental laws. Under the guise of reversing NJ’s economic downturn, they are trying to pin the state’s lack of affordable housing on environmental protections when the truth is greedy developers and corporate bankers. Unfortunately, these bills have the support from too many in the Corzine Administration and State House.

2. Cut the NJ Department of Environmental Protection’s (NJDEP) budget by 12.5% and eliminate 2-300 jobs. On top of the Governor Whitman budget cuts (33%) and staff lay offs (25%) to the NJDEP over a decade ago; 500 additional jobs have been lost in the past 5 years. These additional proposed cuts would undermine the NJDEP’s ability to protect the environment. The bright note is that we might have beaten back Corzine’s plan to close 9 state parks and portions of 3 other parks, but how is this going to be paid for is unclear and may be problematic.

3. A bankrupct Garden State Preservation Trust (GSPT); Governor Corzine and the state legislative leadership currently have no plan to prevent the GSPT, the state’s open space, historic and farmland preservation program, from going bankrupt effectively this year.

4. The Corzine Administration’s proposed Energy Master Plan (EMP) is unhealthy, unsafe, and doesn’t do enough to address global warming. It does not rely heavily enough on clean renewables and energy efficiency. It promotes the construction of a new nuclear power plant. It proposes to keep the nation’s oldest nuke, Oyster Creek (located across from Barnegat Bay), and all of the dirtiest fossil fuels online. This plan goes the wrong way towards implementing the Global Warming Response Act.

5. Slow and weak implementation of the 2004 Highlands Act. These failures threaten the water supply for more than half of New Jersey.

6. Governor Corzine has also failed to implement much of the clean water agenda he campaigned with. What has been adopted are riddled with loopholes. He recently adopted only independent 501(c)(3) organizations which conduct environmental research, education and organizing and one simple way to care for it.

Fortunately, we still have time. The Permit Extension and site remediation bills have not yet passed. Key votes are expected in the Highlands in June and July. The budget isn’t due until the end of June. Public hearings on the EMP will occur in July, etc. There are better choices available. For example, the economy, affordable housing, and the environment don’t have to be zero sum. We can and need to make better choices of where and what to build.

Rather than cutting core NJDEP programs, we could restore and strengthen them. It is not too late. For example, a $150 surcharge on the heaviest, most luxurious, least fuel efficient passenger vehicles could raise up to $350 million per year. Closing corporate loopholes, making polluters pay for their wrongdoing, not funding sprawl, and strengthening the state’s ethics and elections laws are some of the many additional better choices.

ACT NOW! Contact the Governor and your legislators, attend public hearings, write letters to the editor, get others to do the same. The New Jersey Environmental Federation and a federation of local, national, and international environmental organizations that work tirelessly to make our world a healthier place, free from the dangers of neglect, sprawl and pollution. CWF is an independent 501(c)(3) organization which conducts environmental research, education and organizing programs, in collaboration with NJEF. Visit www.cleanwaterfund.org

The New Jersey Chapter of Clean Water Action, Washington, D.C.

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NJEF is constantly looking towards the future and the impacts of our efforts on the world as we advocate for environmental legislation and policies. But one of the questions we constantly strive to answer is how do we educate the next generation to not only maintain and preserve the environment, but to go beyond our current efforts and adopt ingrained behaviors that leave less of a footprint on this earth then we do now.

The moment our children start to ask questions like “why is the sky blue,” or “how come the sand is so hot,” we recognize in them a natural curiosity of their surroundings—their environment. Helping them to begin to understand that they are a valuable participant in its survival also helps give them a connectedness to the planet and their community.

By the time five-year-olds enter kindergarten, they are probably already aware of the world around them. They may know about baby animals, have planted seeds, caught fireflies and walked in the woods or a park. But chances are, they have also seen people trash out their car window, leave the lights and TV on, left the water running or sprayed insecticides all around the kitchen cabinets.

Schools do a good job in developing science and social studies curriculums that include environmental lessons. But real behavior changes take place when reinforced and repeated by a positive role model.

Some folks are reluctant to discuss global warming with youngsters. Either they are still unconvinced that it is a problem caused by humans, or they don’t want to scare their child. Whatever the case, it is imperative that we successfully engage them in solving this very real problem and gives them the tools towards reversing the effects of climate change.

NJEF’s sustainable communities programs have been designed with kids in mind. A recent example is our work with several elementary schools (Jackson, Red Bank, and South Orange) to attack the problem of vehicle exhaust emissions around their school sites and in their communities (vehicle exhaust is the leading source of hazardous air pollution in NJ).

NJEF helped the students create pictures and power point presentations, use persuasive writing skills, and write letters to their local elected officials asking for the enforcement of NJ’s no-idling laws. As a result, South Orange and Jackson have adopted “Anti-idling” ordinances.

The benefit of the program has not only been in reducing emissions in these communities, but the children learned that their efforts are important and do make a difference. Giving kids a voice empowers them to be part of the solution. As kids learn how to do environmental projects, such as energy audits and school recycling projects, they gain the tools needed to bring it home to their everyday lives.

Grow the Green Generation in Your Community!

Growing the green generation is a responsibility that we share and must achieve. For help in implementing sustainable communities programs in your school or community, including pesticide free zones, green cleaning, idle free zones, and recycling, contact Peggi Sturmfels at 732-280-8988 or psturmfels@cleanwater.org.

The Heat Was On at NJEF’s 22nd Annual Conference!

Over 170 people, including environmental activists, local and state leaders, students, environmental commissions, and non-profit organizations gathered at NJEF’s 22nd annual conference at Rutgers University School of Law in Newark, NJ on April 5, 2008.

The conference, entitled The Heat is On!, lit activists fires, helping turn education, learning, and networking into inspiration and activism.

Governor Jon Corzine addresses NJEF conference participants.

NJEF’s conference provided attendees the opportunity to hold their own NJ Governor Corzine accountable. After his keynote speech on his environmental goals and accomplishments, people voiced concerns about many of the environmental promises Corzine has yet to keep during a special question and answer session.

A dynamic environmental justice panel with Mayor Robert Bowser (East Orange), Mayor Wayne Smith (Livingston), and Phil Thompson, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) highlighted critical environmental issues facing urban areas and what must be done at the local and state level to solve them.

The day also featured environmental workshops with state and national experts on drinking water, sustainable communities, global warming, children’s health, environmental justice, water and land rules, and growing the green generation.

NJEF honored New Jersey activists for their grassroots leadership in winning critical environmental victories for New Jersey:

Art Pierfy, Association of Designated Persons, for promoting School Integrated Pest Management (IPM) trainings for over 2000 school principals and facility managers.

Laura Bagwell, Red Bank Environmental Commission for leading the way in turning Red Bank “green” through green cleaning and going pesticide free.

A special thanks to our conference sponsors: Wendy Benchley; Blue Water Wind; Chemical Workers Association; Clean Water Fund; Cooper Pest Control, Inc.; Creative Risk Services, Inc.; Bill and Sharon Fintayson; Freedman’s Bakery, Belmar; Geographic Magazine; Grandmothers, Mothers & More for Energy Safety; Greenblatt & Lieberman, Attorneys at Law; Green Mountain Coffee; Jersey Coast Anglers Association; Joe and Janet Tauro, New Jersey American Water Company; No Escape Screen Printing Company; Pathmark Supermarkets; and Shamrock Heating & Air Conditioning Inc.

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Jennifer Duckworth, Millburn Environmental Commission for educating the public and establishing an “Idle Free New Jersey” campaign in Millburn schools and beyond.

Olga Pomar, South Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance, for stopping eminent domain abuse in Camden, which threatened thousands of families and their homes.

Quest Ink! Inc. for engaging Newark youth for over 25 years and working with NJEF to establish the Urban Environmental Institute.

Thanks to everyone who made our conference a huge success and we hope to see you again next year!