Bush’s plan on wetlands assailed

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CRANFORD TOWNSHIP — Using fall foliage and wetlands as a backdrop, Gov. Florio yesterday fired another series of salvos at the Bush Administration’s proposal to water down the definition of freshwater wetlands.

“This whole approach they’re taking would allow the paving over of wetlands,” said the governor, surrounded by schoolchildren at Lenape Park.

“It’s scientifically unsound and environmentally reckless,” said Florio.

The state Department of Environmental Protection and Energy estimates that roughly 35 to 50 percent of about 300,000 acres of wetlands, now protected by the state Freshwater Wetlands Protection Act of 1987, would be threatened if proposed federal rules take effect.

Richard S. Brown, a section chief in the DEPE’s Land Use Regulation Element, said the proposed U.S. Environmental Protection Agency rules would have the greatest impact in Monmouth and Ocean counties and seven other southern counties.

Robert A. Zampella, science coordinator for the New Jersey Pinelands Commission, said in a telephone interview that the approximately 300,000 acres of wetlands in the Pinelands are protected by commission rules.

The Wetlands Act of 1970 protects another 300,000 acres of tidal wetlands from development.

Freshwater wetlands, once considered worthless until drained for farming or development or used as dumps, include bogs, marshes and swamps.

Wetlands provide natural flood control, filter some water pollutants, help recharge underground water supplies, maintain stream flows and serve as important habitats for wildlife, including some endangered and threatened species.

Florio said the EPA proposal “would be a nightmare for our water supply and an economic disaster for homeowners.”

Under the proposal, “suspecting families might be buying homes that would be built in wetland areas,” with basements subjected to repeated flooding, he said.

“We don’t think people should be sinking their money into a sinking house,” Florio said.

Thomas J. Gilmore, executive director of the New Jersey Audubon Society, said “you cannot have a healthy economy if you don’t have a healthy environment.”

Fish and shellfish that depend on wetlands contribute $17 billion a year to the nation’s economy, while wetland-related recreational activities contribute more than $10 billion, Gilmore said.

President Bush, who campaigned on a promise that he would allow “no net loss of wetlands” throughout the nation, has defended the proposed regulations as “defining wetlands in a common-sense way that preserves the nation’s wetlands but makes good sense.”

The White House has proposed the changes because it believes the existing definition of wetlands is too restrictive. Developers, farmers, and real estate interests support the proposal.

The EPA proposal would throw out a 1989 manual for defining wetlands. New Jersey’s law, which requires buffer zones of varying widths around freshwater wetlands, says the state must follow the federal manual.

The two key proposed changes are:

■ Mandating that three criteria be present in every site determined to be wetlands — a saturated water surface, certain types of soil and the presence of water-loving plants. Under the 1989 manual, a wetlands finding could be made with only one of the criteria present.

■ All wetlands must be inundated by water for 15 or more consecutive days or have saturation to the surface for 21 or more consecutive days during the growing season. Under the 1989 manual, inundation or saturation was only required for seven days.

The EPA recently extended its comment period on the proposal from Oct. 15 to Dec. 15.

DEPE officials say New Jersey could change its law so it doesn’t have to follow the federal manual, but that’s much easier said than done. It took more than four years to get a law on the books.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.