

SAVING WETLANDS

Florio, pupils fault Bush bid to ease rules

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By NICHOLAS VERONIS

Luke Weeks, a Cranford eighth-grader, looked around Lenape Park yesterday and said, "He wants to develop the wetlands and you're not supposed to do that. There's not much non-developed land left in Cranford."

The 13-year-old was referring to President Bush and, more specifically, a proposal crafted by the administration that would make it more difficult to designate an area as wetlands and would place thousands of acres in New Jersey in danger of development.

Weeks was one of several students from the Orange Avenue School on hand for a speech by Gov. Jim Florio, who chose the location to emphasize his opposition to the Bush proposal. Lenape Park is a wetlands in the middle of Union County, one of the most densely populated areas in the state.

"Does everyone know why we are here?" the Governor asked the students. "We have to send a message to some fellows who may not be as smart as you are, I suspect."

Florio released copies of a letter he sent yesterday to William Reilly, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, in which he urged the administration to reconsider the proposed changes, which he called "environmentally reckless" and "a nightmare for our clean water supply in New Jersey."

The Governor said that as much as 150,000 acres, or half of the state's freshwater wetlands, could be "opened up" to real estate developers if the proposal is adopted.

Also present were several state officials and representatives of environmental organizations, who portrayed the President's proposal as a feeble, short-sighted attempt to jump-start the economy.

"The administration totally caved in to oil and development interests," said Thomas Gilmore, executive director of the New Jersey Audubon Society. "This is the single greatest attack on our natural resources since Earth Day 1970," which kicked off the environmental revolution. "That's how serious this is."

Noting the proposal was crafted by the Committee on Competitiveness, which is chaired by Vice President Dan Quayle, Gilmore said it was based on political, not environmental or scientific, considerations.

"This country is less than 5 percent wetlands. Opening these areas to development will not jump-start the economy but will destroy precious natural resources," he said.

Scott Weiner, commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Protection and Energy (DEPE), said the proposed changes would have a tremendous impact on New Jersey, which has more to lose than most states.



Photo by John O'Boyle

Gov. Jim Florio listens as Environmental Protection and Energy Commissioner Scott Weiner discusses wetlands law with pupils from the Orange Avenue School at Lenape Park in Cranford

New Jersey, with some 850,000 acres of wetlands, ranks fourth among the 48 contiguous states, Weiner said. He added the DEPE has projected that 35 to 50 percent of the wetlands would be threatened if the proposed changes are adopted.

Some 300,000 acres of wetlands are protected by coastal regulations and would not be threatened.

In addition, 250,000 acres of wetlands in the Pine-lands are protected by special regulations, but the tract's safety is not guaranteed. The changes would have the greatest impact on New Jersey's 300,000 acres of freshwater wetlands.

Besides providing a habitat for wildlife, wetlands serve the function of absorbing floodwaters, which otherwise might run off into residential areas.

The Bush administration proposal comes at a time when environmental groups throughout the country are pressing for more stringent laws to protect wetlands. Florio called the proposal particularly distressing because it would undermine New Jersey's Freshwater Wetlands Protection Act of 1987, the toughest in the nation.

Under federal policy, wetlands are defined, in part, as areas which are saturated within one foot of the surface for seven days during the growing season. The proposed revisions would require 21 days of saturation at the surface only.

Robert Piel Jr., manager of the DEPE's bureau of inland regulation, said that in defining wetlands, the federal policy takes into account soil, vegetation and water levels. The proposed changes, he said, "focus mainly on water on the surface, essentially ignoring" soil and vegetation.