

Environment takes a big hit in Bush's new budget

By MICHELE S. BYERS

When the framers of our Constitution reached an impasse over how to balance the needs of smaller and larger states, the "Great Compromise" created the House of Representatives and Senate. The coming months will tell how well this compromise still works, as New Jersey's federal legislators defend our state's interests in the 2008 fiscal year budget process.

The Bush administration has proposed a budget that shortchanges New Jersey in many areas, including education, public health and transportation. But the proposal is especially harsh on New Jersey's environment.

Federal funding for natural resources and the environment are being rolled back to their lowest point since 2001. Here's how the state's U.S. senators, Frank Lautenberg and Robert Menendez, both Democrats, estimate some of the cuts would affect New Jersey:

■ **Land conservation:** The main tool for federal land preservation is the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Over the 40-year history of the fund, New Jersey has received more than \$330 million for projects including the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area and Edison National Historic Site.

The president proposes a 60 percent cut in the already underfinanced federal programs supported by the fund and elimination of state support that has created hundreds of parks, natural areas and outdoor recreation facilities in New Jersey.

A second critical conservation pro-

gram is the Forest Legacy program, which the president's budget cuts nearly in half. New Jersey has preserved more than 4,100 acres of forest with the help of this program. Without adequate funding, it will be that much harder to preserve the many more threatened acres, such as Sparta Mountain in the Highlands. And despite congressional support, the president's budget proposal doesn't include any funding for preservation in the Highlands region in New Jersey.

The president's budget also severely cuts the staff of the Resource Conservation and Development Program, which will impede soil conservation and land and water management efforts.

The budget for farm programs is up in the air because federal programs are likely to be restructured to some degree under a new farm bill in the works. However, the president's budget proposes a dramatic increase in funding for the Wetlands Reserve Program, which encourages farmers to restore cultivated wetlands to their original uncultivated state.

But several conservation programs for working lands — particularly important to New Jersey's small farmers — face consolidation and budget cuts. Programs like the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program would be eliminated and folded into the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Unfortunately, funding for this program is also cut by \$17 million in the proposed budget, despite the added program areas.

■ **Clean water:** New Jersey stands to lose \$8 million from the Clean Water State Revolving Fund, a program that upgrades drinking water and sewage

infrastructure. In addition, the fifth straight year of proposed cuts to the nonpoint source grant program would hinder New Jersey's efforts to control runoff pollution just as we are starting to get a sense of how dangerous and pervasive it really is.

The president's budget also eliminates the Environmental Protection Agency's Targeted Watershed program, from which New Jersey has received more than \$2.5 million in the past five years, for community-based watershed preservation efforts in the Raritan River, Passaic River and Lake Hopatcong watersheds.

■ **Hazardous waste:** New Jersey has more Superfund sites than any other state. The administration budget proposes finishing only 24 cleanups nationally this year (less than one-third of the 80-plus completed in the late '90s). Cutting funds for cleaning up the nation's most polluted sites hardly seems prudent for public health.

The good news: Both of New Jersey's senators sit on the Senate Budget Committee, so they are in a position to make sure New Jersey's interests are heard. But they will need our help to protect New Jersey's natural resources and environment.

You can let the president know that you want our environment protected by calling the White House at (202) 456-1111, or through the White House Web site (www.whitehouse.gov). You can read Lautenberg and Menendez's budget analysis under the "Latest News" sections of their Web sites (lautenberg.senate.gov or menendez.senate.gov).

Michele S. Byers is executive director of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, Far Hills.

