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2 Pinelands commissioners may lose seats

*BY KIRK MOORE
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They are often far apart on some Pinelands issues, but the region's farmers and conservationists are sounding similar complaints on the Corzine administration's move to replace the two longest-serving members of the Pinelands Commission.

"We were completely blindsided by this," Peter Furey of the New Jersey Farm Bureau said of news today that Chatsworth cranberry farmer Steven V. Lee III, a commissioner since 1982, could be replaced by Kelly A. Mooij, the State House environmental lobbyist for New Jersey Audubon. Furey said the group is "outraged" by the potential ouster, which if the state Senate acts, could happen in January before the incoming Christie administration takes over governing.

Environmental groups in turn were stunned by the intended replacement of commission Candace McKee Ashmun, a longtime conservationist from Basking Ridge and the last of the original Pinelands Commission from 1979. Ashmun's seat could go to Jeffrey K. Laurenti, a senior fellow and foreign policy expert at The Century Foundation, and former executive director of the state Senate in the 1980s.

Laurenti was among several names presented to the Corzine administration when it began three years ago to think about appointments to the 15-member Pinelands panel, where some members have been serving without reappointment since 2005 and 2007.

"Candy Ashmun is a person of unique value to the commission" for her institutional memory and knowledge of how the Pinelands comprehensive management plan took shape, said Carelton Montgomery of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance. "It baffles me why Jon Corzine would want to do that."

The board has broad jurisdiction over land-use and environmental regulation on more than 900,000 acres - about a fifth of New Jersey's land mass - and since its creation in 1979 the balance of power has shifted back and forth between key groups including farmers, pro-business groups and Pinelands counties, and pro-preservation forces.

Three other commission members - serving commissioners Edward Lloyd and Guy Campbell, and new appointee Larry Niles - were named by Corzine in June, but have yet to be confirmed.

The Senate Judiciary Committee meets Jan. 4 and could act on the nominations then. After the delay in making Pinelands nominations, "they should just face facts and admit they couldn't get it done, and leave it for the incoming administration," Furey said.
