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Playing politics with Pinelands

Among the many appointments Gov. Jon Corzine is trying to rush through in his waning days in office are two that will push out longtime Pinelands Commission members, both Republicans, with a combined 57 years of experience. The news has conservationists and farmers seething, with good reason.

It's an unconscionable move that puts politics ahead of good policy. Under "senatorial courtesy," the state Senate will not schedule a confirmation hearing until each senator representing any part of the individual's home county signs off on the nomination. Sen. Jennifer Beck has parts of Mercer County, where the new appointees are from, in her legislative district. She should refuse to sign off on either.

The news of the pending ouster of Candace Ashmun of Basking Ridge, one of the commission's most outspoken members who now serves as vice chair, and cranberry farmer Stephen V. Lee III of Middle Township, who is an important link to the Pinelands families who own vast tracts of bogs and forested watershed, is prompting objections from environmental groups and warnings that the change will alienate farmers.

Peter Furey of the state Farm Bureau said the agency was "completely blind-sided" at the news and that the ejection of Lee "is very strange and wrong in so many ways." Carleton Montgomery of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance called Ashmun "a person of unique value to the commission" and said, "It baffles me why Jon Corzine would want to do that."

In their place, Corzine has appointed Jeffrey K. Laurenti of Trenton, a Democrat who serves as director of foreign policy programs for the Century Foundation, a public policy group, who ran unsuccessfully against Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., and Kelly Mooij of Trenton, unaffiliated, a lawyer and Statehouse lobbyist for New Jersey Audubon. Corzine also reappointed Robert Jackson, a Middle Township Democrat, one of the commission's newest members.

In July, in response to a Press editorial that criticized Corzine for taking so long to fill another vacancy on the Pinelands Commission, he wrote to explain that the commission appointee was blocked when two of his home county senators, Republicans, refused to sign off. That wasn't right, but that appointee wasn't replacing qualified, sitting commissioners.

Corzine opened his letter by pointing out that the Pinelands Commission serves as guardian of 1,449 square miles of protected lands, and said, "As governor, I would never allow politics to put that stewardship at risk."

So what happened? Why are two longtime members of the commission being "dumped unceremoniously," as Sierra Club President Jeff Tittel put it, in favor of Trenton bureaucrats?

Corzine also wrote that he agreed with the editorial's point that the commission "needs more members ... who will provide thorough, careful and critical analysis and review of proposals that affect the Pinelands." In his rush to get Democrats into positions of power, Corzine wants to rid the commission of two members who already do just that. Beck should make sure that doesn't happen.