

N.J. Senate should stand fast in Pinelands standoff

You'd think Gov. Chris Christie would get the message by now: The Pinelands are not for sale.

That land is an ecological dreamscape — home to plant and animal species that cannot be found anywhere else on the planet, all hovering over a pristine aquifer that contains 17 trillion gallons of fresh water. To thread a pipeline through its bowels would desecrate our most glorious tableau.

So while you expect Christie to push his dubious energy agenda — the one he shares with too many South Jersey Democrats — the Senate Judiciary Committee was justified to freeze his two nominees to the Pinelands Commission last week for not offering their opinion about building a 22-mile pipeline through the Pinelands to the B.L. England plant. This project would benefit South Jersey Gas and its export ambitions more than it would the ratepayers of Atlantic and Cape May counties.

Let's be clear: The governor has a right to nominate like-minded people. But the Legislature also has the right to reject them.

The governor's strategy in the Pinelands echoes his strategy in the Highlands. He knows he lacks the leverage to repeal the protections outright, so he is undermining enforcement by packing the agencies that govern them with people who don't support the mission.

Christie's pro-development agenda is reckless on both fronts. The pipeline he is pushing in the Pinelands was condemned by four former governors, two from each party: Brendan Byrne, Tom Kean, Christine Whitman and Jim Florio. They said it would "compromise the integrity of the Pinelands plan and serve to encourage future development."

Still, after the Pinelands Commission rejected the pipeline in January with a 7-7 vote (it would take eight "yes" votes to pass), Christie decided it was time to stack the deck.

Some nay-votes came from Christie's own appointees — including D'Arcy Rohan Green, a Republican fundraiser who was always an ardent environmentalist, even before Hurricane Sandy reduced her Bay Head home to matchsticks.

Predictably miffed, the governor downshifted to Bully Ball: He vetoed the minutes from the January meeting, nullifying a 5 percent raise the commissioners had proposed for 33 Pinelands employees, who have had nothing but salary reductions the last four years. He even called the raises a "gross abuse of authority" — a knee-slapper for the guy who gave 27 staffers a \$338,000 reward for his successful re-election campaign.

Then he went to work on retrofitting the commission by not reappointing the likes of Green. To use former Gov. Jim Florio's delicate interpretation, "You never want to assume there's bad faith, but it's important to avoid even the perception that you're trying to manipulate votes."

Help yourself to that one. Christie has pulled the plug on RGGI, pinched more than \$1 billion from the clean energy fund, has shown no interest in keeping his state from sinking and has demonized all regulations as job-killers.

In short, as he worships at the Church of Koch, he has relinquished all good faith pertaining to environmental discourse. The Pinelands Commission defeat is just the kind of constraint this governor has earned.

Our hope is the Senate holds its ground. It needs assurances that the guardians of the Pinelands value protection of the land over the governor's agenda.