

Groups rally in Trenton for greater Pinelands protections

By David Levinsky, staff writer | Posted: Monday, March 14, 2016 2:00 pm

TRENTON — The New Jersey Pinelands Reserve is in greater peril than at anytime in the last 35 years.

So say the leaders of the nonprofit Pinelands Preservation Alliance and several other environmental groups, who claim the million-acre reserve is facing threats from several fronts, including the proposed construction of two natural gas pipelines through the Pines, as well as rampant off-road vehicle damage and political interference with the state Pinelands Commission, the agency charged with overseeing development in the reserve.

With those threats in mind, several dozen supporters rallied outside the War Memorial on Memorial Drive on Monday morning and then marched to the nearby Statehouse to call on lawmakers to help protect the environmentally-sensitive Pinelands.

"We need to let the Legislature and governor know that we've had enough already," said Jaclyn Rhoads, assistant director of the alliance, which organized the rally and lobbying day.

Earlier this month, the group released its annual State of the Pinelands Report which was highly critical of government actions that it believes put the reserve at risk.

Standing under the roof of the main entrance, supporters sang songs, waved signs and chanted slogans during the rally, which also featured short speeches from several environmental leaders, sympathetic lawmakers, and the leader of a local pipeline opposition group.

"We're here today to tell the people of New Jersey they have to stick up for the Pinelands again," said Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club.

Most of the attention at the rally was directed at the two pipeline projects.

The first, proposed by South Jersey Gas Co., is planned to run 22 miles from Maurice River in Cumberland County to Cape May County's Upper Township, where it would fuel the coal-fired B.L. England plant, which is slated to be converted to natural gas.



Environmental groups rally to raise awareness about issues impacting the New Jersey Pinelands on Monday, March 14, 2016, at the Trenton War Memorial in Trenton.

The second pipeline, proposed by New Jersey Natural Gas and dubbed the Southern Reliability Link, is intended to start at a compressor station off Route 528 in Chesterfield and continue for 30 miles east through North Hanover, Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst and several towns in Monmouth and Ocean counties before connecting with New Jersey Natural Gas' system in Manchester, Ocean County.

New Jersey Natural Gas says it's needed to provide a second transmission feed to its territory, which it claims is crucial for both reliability and resiliency.

Both pipelines cross portions of the protected Pinelands, but were ultimately given the go-ahead without a vote by the full 15-member Pinelands Commission, because the agency's executive director and staff determined that they complied with Pinelands development rules, known as the Comprehensive Management Plan.

The South Jersey Gas line approvals have drawn the scorn of the Sierra Club and advocacy group Environment New Jersey, which have sued the Pinelands Commission to block the line's construction. The Pinelands Preservation Alliance has also filed a lawsuit appealing the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities' decision to approve the South Jersey pipeline.

The Sierra Club also threatened to sue if the BPU approves New Jersey Natural Gas' pipeline through northern Burlington County. The agency has already approved the line's route, and the board is scheduled to meet Friday to consider the utility company's application for the project to be declared in the public interest and thus exempt from local zoning laws and regulations.

At the rally, Andrea Katz, a Chesterfield resident and member of grass-roots opposition group People Not Pipelines, described the proposed pipeline and compressor station as a "giant ticking time bomb" in the middle of town. She claimed the only reason for it is to help the utility company profit.

"I think our Pinelands are worth more than a gas company's necessity to make more money," said Katz, who is also an elected member of the Chesterfield Board of Education.

Assemblymen Robert Dancer, R-12th of Plumsted, and Robert Clifton, R-12th of Matawan, also spoke, urging opponents at the rally to lobby other lawmakers to support the pipeline-related legislation they have introduced.

Dancer cited a bill that would require public comments at BPU meetings and another that would codify into state law the BPU's restriction on locating high-pressure gas transmission lines near occupied homes and businesses. The rule was waived by the agency for the Southern Reliability Link.

"We're going to take it from a regulation and put it into statute so public safety will be upheld," Dancer said.

In addition to the two gas pipeline projects, environmental groups at the rally said they also took

issue with Gov. Chris Christie's decisions to replace Robert Jackson, a longtime Pinelands Commission member who opposed the South Jersey Gas pipeline, with a new commissioner from Ocean City, and his more recent move to remove Mark Lohbauer, another pipeline opponent, as the commission's chairman.

Lohbauer continues to serve as a commissioner.

The groups are also critical of the state Department of Environmental Protection's decision to shelve the planned closure of 225 miles of trails through Wharton State Forest to motorized vehicles, claiming the closures are needed to protect sensitive wetlands and wildlife habitat from vehicle damage.

The DEP is devising a new plan to boost enforcement of illegal off-road-vehicle use in the park, but environmental groups insist that some trail closures are needed.

The Pinelands Commission also has the authority to order trail and road closures in the reserve, and it has asked its staff to begin reviewing areas of Wharton that are the most environmentally sensitive where restricted vehicle access may be warranted.

Tittel said Monday's event was just the beginning of a greater campaign to ensure that Pinelands protections remain intact.

"This isn't just one event. It's the beginning of a grass-roots campaign to protect the Pinelands all over again," he said.