

Danger in the Pinelands: Editorial



An energy company wants to run a pipeline under parts of New Jersey's Pinelands. *(Andrew Mills/The Star-Ledger)*

[Print](#)



By [Star-Ledger Editorial Board](#)

on December 22, 2013 at 7:00 AM, updated December 22, 2013 at 7:06 AM

The Oyster Creek nuclear power plant in Ocean County is the oldest in the nation and **will close by 2019**. That's welcome news, given the safety risk and the damage the plant has done to Barnegat Bay by dumping massive amounts of heated water into its delicate ecosystem.

But the closure will leave a gaping hole in New Jersey's energy mix, a hole that must be plugged if we want to keep the lights on. There are two options: replace the lost juice by building new power plants or build transmission lines to import the energy from other states.

This is a major challenge. And unfortunately, the state's first big move to address the problem is a major misfire.

The plan is to **run a natural gas pipeline through the Pinelands** to supply a refurbished power plant, a move that would break faith with long-standing, bipartisan efforts to keep the region pristine. The project requires a waiver from the Pinelands Commission because it breaks the standing rules that limit development in the area.

The Christie administration is pushing the plan hard. But on Dec. 12, in an extraordinary rebuke of a sitting governor, **four former governors wrote the Pinelands Commission** asking it to reject the plan. They are Democrats Brendan Byrne and Jim Florio and Republicans Christie Whitman and Tom Kean.

Their concern, widely shared by environmentalists, is that development pressure is eroding protections of the Pinelands and that granting this waiver will accelerate the process.

Taking a strict stand, they argue, will force developers to devise new plans that would steer around sensitive areas.

To understand why the former governors feel so strongly, some history helps. These protections were the crowning achievement of the Byrne administration, with a crucial assist from Florio, who served in Congress at the time.

An extraordinary rebuke of a sitting governor.

The Pinelands include 1.1 million acres, roughly one-fourth of New Jersey's land mass. Pristine pine forests cover about 800,000 acres, which sit over giant aquifers supplying clean water to the entire region. It is the largest protected area on the East Coast.

Under the rules, **the Pinelands are divided into several zones** with varying degrees of protection. The relevant one here states that utility infrastructure, such as this pipeline, can only be built to serve the local population. This pipeline would feed gas into a power plant serving a wider region, which is why a waiver is needed.

The project's developer, South Jersey Gas, has promised to donate \$8 million to purchase private land that abuts the 22-mile pipeline and preserve it forever as

undeveloped land. That is an attempt to address fears that the pipeline will spur nearby development.

But that misses the larger problem cited by the governors, who worry a waiver would encourage other developers to seek waivers for their own pet projects. It sends the wrong signal at a time when development pressures are intense.

“The plan will only work over the long term if the plan is implemented consistently,” they wrote.

The former governors have it right. Our hope is that the Pinelands Commission holds the line until a better plan comes along.