Blue Ridge beauty at risk

Lawmakers seek to slash conservation programs

Generations of North Carolinians have enjoyed the incredible views along the Blue Ridge Parkway, thanks in part to state conservation efforts that have protected the surrounding land from development. Yet some lawmakers are putting the natural beauty of the Blue Ridge at risk through short-sighted efforts to eliminate funding for the state’s conservation programs.

Environment North Carolina is urging the governor and state legislators to reject these efforts, and we’re mobilizing people across the state to join us in defending the Blue Ridge and the rest of the state’s natural areas.

Beginning in 1987 with the Natural Heritage Trust Fund, the state has created programs to purchase undeveloped parcels near the Parkway in order to keep them forever off-limits to development. These efforts have been instrumental in maintaining the natural character of the region, given the threat of development in western North Carolina, which consumes 200 acres of green space every week.

Two-thirds of lands unprotected

Two-thirds of the land that surrounds the Parkway lacks permanent protections, meaning it could fall prey to development, logging or other harmful activities. Heffner Gap, which straddles McDowell and Mitchell Counties, is one of those spots.

A key component of the historic Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail, Heffner Gap could be preserved forever with a grant from the state’s largest land conservation program, the Clean Water Management Trust Fund. Yet, at press time, the House’s chief budget writers had proposed a budget that would slash the Clean Water Fund by 80 percent and prohibit the Heffner Gap land conservation project—along with virtually all other projects across the state.

By uniting the voices of thousands of citizens who oppose dramatic cuts to our land conservation funds, we hope to convince Gov. Bev Perdue and state legislators to stand up for the state’s green spaces and preserve some of the country’s most stunning vistas.

Links to additional content are posted on our website:

www.EnvironmentNorthCarolina.org
No matter where you live in North Carolina, summer offers you plenty of opportunities to enjoy the outdoors: relaxing at the beach, shopping at your farmers’ market, hiking, or maybe jogging at your local park. But at some point this season, you’ll need to escape the heat. For that, there’s no better route than the Blue Ridge Parkway.

From Looking Glass Falls to Grandfather Mountain, the Blue Ridge offers some of the most beautiful views in America, thanks in large part to the foresight of state leaders from both parties who enacted key conservation programs over the last few decades. These programs take up less than one percent of the state budget, yet pay dividends for generations.

As some in the General Assembly consider whether to slash or even eliminate funds for these programs, I hope you’ll join us this summer in showing your support for the Blue Ridge.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Ouzts
State Director

House budget would harm environment

This April, lawmakers in North Carolina’s House of Representatives proposed a budget that, if enacted, would leave treasured green spaces at risk to development, close state educational forests, and lead to lax enforcement of the laws designed to keep the state’s air and waterways clean.

“This proposed budget is just awful for North Carolina’s environment,” said Elizabeth Ouzts, state director of Environment North Carolina. “We’re calling on the state Senate and Gov. Bev Perdue to do better for our green spaces, air quality, and drinking water.”

Rep. tries to block high-speed rail

As the state Department of Transportation geared up to spend $461 million in federal grants for improved train service from Raleigh to Charlotte, some legislators say North Carolina should instead return these critical funds to Washington.

In January 2010, the Obama administration pledged to send $545 million to North Carolina to aid the development of high-speed rail as part of the economic recovery package—legislation backed by Environment North Carolina and its national federation. While state and federal officials finalized plans in April for the disbursement of all but $25 million of the total grant, Rep. Ric Killian and six other lawmakers have filed a bill to prevent the state from accepting the funds.

“High-speed rail will help reduce oil dependence and spur the creation of 4,800 jobs,” said Environment North Carolina’s Margaret Hartzell. “We’re calling on lawmakers to reject Rep. Killian’s proposal.”
Is nuclear power worth the risk?

Our hearts go out to the people of Japan who, after seeing a massive earthquake and tsunami strike their country, were forced to contend with an escalating nuclear crisis.

At press time, the consequences were still unfolding: Hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated from the area around the reactors, and high radiation levels were found in the nearby ocean waters.

Should we be concerned about America’s 104 nuclear plants posing similar risks to our children’s health and our environment? Based on our analysis, yes. At its most basic level, Mother Nature proved stronger than the best safeguards that Japan could design. Why would we be different?

For example: One of the largest threats from the Fukushima plants is the spent fuel pools that contain more than a thousand tons of spent fuel rods, which can catch fire and lead to a massive release of high-level radiation. Progress Energy’s Shearon Harris Plant in the Triangle has three times as many spent fuel pools as those in Japan. Environment North Carolina is urging state leaders to reject incentives for more nuclear power plants in the Carolinas, and, together with our national federation, is urging the Obama administration to responsibly phase out our use of nuclear power in favor of clean, renewable energy.

On Feb. 19, the U.S. House used a must-pass spending bill to launch what amounted to the largest assault on our health, clean air and clean water in recent history.

Fortunately, the bill, which would have crippled the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s ability to protect air and water, failed to become law after Sen. Kay Hagan and a majority of senators voted against it.

The original proposed budget, known as the “Continuing Resolution,” was a dangerous attack on the nation’s health and environment. It threatened the health of North Carolina’s children, elderly citizens and other vulnerable populations by blocking the EPA from enforcing the Clean Air Act and cleaning up dangerous carbon dioxide pollution from coal-fired power plants and oil refineries.

Blocking these pollution limits would allow global warming to continue unchecked, submitting those with asthma—hundreds of thousands in North Carolina—to a greater risk of attacks. Further, the budget proposals threatened the drinking water supplies of nearly 5 million North Carolinians by blocking the EPA’s ability to restore Clean Water Act protections for the waterways that feed these drinking water supplies.

Making it even worse

Rather than reject these attacks, and others in the bill, the House then made the budget even worse.

Exposure to mercury puts children at risk of learning disabilities, developmental disorders and lower IQs. But an amendment blocking the EPA from doing its job to cut mercury and other toxic air pollution from cement plants was adopted overwhelmingly, with the support of North Carolina Reps. Renee Ellmers, Sue Myrick, Patrick McHenry, Virginia Foxx and Howard Coble.

The same representatives also supported an amendment blocking the EPA from treating toxic coal ash like the hazardous waste that it is.

The House even added an amendment blocking the EPA from updating air quality standards for soot pollution—a pollutant that causes heart attacks and cuts short the lives of thousands of Americans each year.

Five from North Carolina say “no.”

North Carolina Reps. Larry Kissell, Brad Miller, Mike McIntyre, David Price, Heath Shuler, and Mel Watt spoke out against these attacks on public health. But when the final votes were cast, the House had passed a bill that was the largest assault on the air we breathe and the water we drink in recent history.

More attacks against our core environmental laws are expected in the coming months. In the meantime, Environment North Carolina is prepared to campaign against each one of them.

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New bills spur clean energy in North Carolina

In April, lawmakers in both houses of the General Assembly filed bills to promote solar and wind energy, in a move backed by Environment North Carolina, clean energy advocates and green businesses across the state.

A study released in December estimates that North Carolina has more offshore wind potential than any state on the Atlantic coast—capable of supplying the entire state’s electricity needs. At the same time, North Carolina gets twice as much sunshine as Germany, the world’s solar leader, and could see the construction of 100,000 solar roofs in the next 10 years with the right incentives in place.

State Reps. Ruth Samuelson and Tom Murry, along with Sens. Fletcher Hartsell Jr. and Josh Stein, have introduced bills to double the state’s solar energy requirement, encourage more rooftop solar projects for big box retail stores, and encourage offshore wind development.

Clean energy news update: The Obama administration announced new efforts to spur the development of offshore wind power, including a $50 million pledge for research and development.