

Earth Day in New Jersey

We have a lot to celebrate!

by Senator Bob Smith

Earth Day (April 22) provides a perfect excuse for a springtime hike in one of New Jersey's fabulous state parks or forests. But it is also a good time to step back and assess what we have done for the environment over the past year. As Chairman of the Senate Environment Committee, I am proud to report that we are making great progress and the state of New Jersey's environment in 2005 is much better than it was a year ago.

I have the honor to serve New Jersey in one of the most environmentally historic periods of our state's history. Many of the bills we sent on to become law will undoubtedly shape the state's environmental policy for years.

Last year, we approved one of the most significant environmental achievements of the past 20 years in the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act. This milestone will protect the water quality for nearly half of New Jersey's population for years to come. The Highlands Act couples an aggressive preservation policy with smart growth planning to create one of the most comprehensive environmental safety nets ever seen in the Garden State. Action was necessary because of the threat of encroaching development and suburban sprawl, which jeopardized the pristine quality of the Highlands water resources.

In response to flooding last summer in southern New Jersey, the Senate Environment Committee approved a bill sponsored by Senator Wayne Bryant to give the Department of Environmental Protection the authority to penalize negligent private dam owners who let their dams fall into disrepair. Coupled with efforts pending to free up State bond funds for public and private dam improvements, these measures will go a long way to ensure the safety of communities at significant risk due to dam failure.

We approved a bill to require that mercury switches be removed from automobiles before they are scrapped or recycled, a move that will reduce the danger of mercury contamination in New Jersey. While this dangerous substance has been eliminated in newer vehicles, many older cars still contain mercury switches. When the cars are melted to recycle steel, the mercury is released, polluting our air, and causing developmental problems in children and nervous system disorders in adults. This measure became law in March, thanks to the efforts of Senators Stephen M. Sweeney and Barbara Buono.

The committee also passed a bill, which became law in January, that contains reasonable limits on liability for redevelopers of brownfield sites so they are not held liable for natural resource damage done by previous owners of a contaminated site, who remain responsible for site cleanup. This bill will stimulate the redevelopment of previously contaminated properties.

As we look ahead, a number of important initiatives, for which we've already laid the

groundwork, are major priorities in 2005.

We will look to reduce air pollution in the Garden State. I am sponsoring a bill to reduce emissions from certain vehicles and equipment powered by diesel engines. The program would establish new, stricter standards for diesel emissions from certain vehicles, such as commercial buses, sanitation vehicles and local diesel trucks. This will limit public exposure to diesel emissions, which causes cancer in roughly one in every 1,600 New Jersey residents. The national average is one in every 2,754 people. Approximately 1,000 New Jersey residents die each year from exposure to diesel particulates. Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent on health care because of this insidious air pollutant. The New York, Philadelphia and Trenton metro areas have some of the highest occurrences of cancer, heart problems and death from diesel emissions. Also, according to the federal Environmental Protection Agency, New Jersey does not meet health-based standards for fine particle pollution.

This legislation would substantially decrease diesel emissions through the retrofitting of diesel engines. The bill would also strengthen school bus idling standards and could provide for air pollution control devices on school busses for the protection for our children.

Maximizing the benefit from our environmental dollars is paramount. The Senate has passed legislation, sponsored by Senator John Adler, for site remediation and brownfield redevelopment. This is a shining example of the sort of fiscally sound, environmentally sensitive development which will restore our urban areas, make use of existing resources, and bring commercial opportunities into our State's cities.

Lastly, we have given statutory direction to the Green Acres land preservation program, which requires that New Jersey focus its land acquisitions on properties that are protective of water resources.

New Jersey is a state where large tracts of open space and immense urban landscapes can coexist side by side, but only if we are ever-vigilant as to the impact that we have on the environment. If we are responsible, we will be able to enjoy the natural beauty of the Garden State and protect the health of our citizens for many years to come.

Senator Bob Smith, a Democrat, is Chairman of the New Jersey Senate Environment Committee and represents parts of Middlesex and Somerset counties.