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DEC layoff blowback: cleaning the environment with a 'toothbrush and a garden hose'

Wednesday, September 29, 2010 at 1:57 PM by [Rick Karlin](#) in [Environment](#)

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We put up an earlier [post](#) about the state Department of Environmental Conservation's plan to lay off 209 people by Dec. 31 and the response by at least two statewide environmental organizations, Environmental Advocates and the Adirondack Council, was pretty quick and here they are.

From Environmental Advocates:

In response to Governor David Paterson's recent order that the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) lay off 209 employees, Environmental Advocates of New York is calling on the Governor to reconsider. Additional cuts to the already beleaguered agency will dramatically cut the DEC's ability to respond to serious environmental hazards, not to mention critical routine functions such as monitoring air and water pollution.

"These staff cuts must make DEC Commissioner Pete Grannis feel like he's got to clean up New York's toxic chemical spills armed with a toothbrush and a garden hose," said Alison Jenkins, Fiscal Policy Program Director, Environmental Advocates of New York. "Under the guise of fiscal responsibility, Governor Paterson is undoing years of progress on environmental protection in New York, which is ironic given that the agency is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year."

The layoffs, which should be announced later this week, come after the agency approved 260 employees for the early retirement incentive. In 2007-08, the DEC had 3,775 staff. The target for the end of the year is 2,926 staff, a decrease of 849 staff or 22 percent. These are the lowest staff levels since the 1980's, despite an increase in the agency's responsibilities.

The agency is responsible for providing oversight for air and water quality, open space, forests, wetlands, gas and oil drilling, hazardous waste, hunting and fishing, invasive species eradication, dam safety, and many other programs. The wellbeing of all New Yorkers depends on the DEC to enforce existing environmental laws.

The layoffs are in addition to other budget cuts for non-personal services such as travel and equipment for inspections and testing for chemicals such as pesticides. With resources for these critical activities cut in half since the 2007-08 budget year, the agency can only afford to respond to 150 oil spills rather than the annual average of 350.

And from the Adirondack Council:

The Adirondack Council today called on Governor Paterson to stop dismantling environmental protection in the state, following Paterson's announcement that he would lay off 209 employees of the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) by the end of the year.

"These cuts are a direct threat to public health and safety. Not only are they unsustainable," said Adirondack Council Executive Director Brian L. Houseal, "they are unconscionable. DEC's ability to do its job has already been compromised. This will make a bad situation much worse."

"These additional cuts will ensure that environmental stewardship and enforcement will suffer across the state," Houseal explained. "DEC's acid rain and air pollution monitoring is already being shut down in the western Adirondacks. Water pollution inspections will suffer. Fish and wildlife poachers will have little to fear from rangers and game wardens, who don't have funds to adequately patrol their territories."

Houseal noted that Governor Paterson's staff cuts at the state's major environmental agencies (DEC, the Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation, Dept. of Agriculture & Markets, Department of State and the Adirondack Park Agency) had accounted for more than 40 percent of all state staff losses during the Paterson Administration. With this most recent announcement, DEC will have seen its workforce reduced by 23 percent since 2008, when it was staffed at a level of 3,775 employees. The announced layoffs will bring DEC's staff statewide to a level of 2,925.

"The Department of Environmental Conservation and Adirondack Park Agency are now at their lowest staffing levels since the agencies were created in the early 1970s.

Several weeks ago, Governor Paterson announced the state would seek to lay off 2,000 employees due to the fact that the early retirement program had not reached the savings envisioned by budget planners. Some state agencies kept employees from participating in the early retirement program so that their positions would not be eliminated. DEC was not one of these agencies.

"This is the reward they get for trying to help the Governor achieve his goals," said Houseal. "In the last few weeks, 220 DEC employees have retired and are no longer protecting our air, water and other natural resources. This was a great loss of many dedicated employees who had spent long careers doing what is right for the environment across the state.

"This new plan for additional layoffs is just kicking a good agency while it is down," he said. "It has brought agency morale to an all-time low."

The Paterson administration has also cut DEC's non-personnel budget by more than 50 percent in the last two fiscal years. This pays for everything except salaries — from gas for Forest Rangers to patrol the Adirondacks to the paper for fishing license applications and office supplies.

"This is the latest mark on the wrong side of the Governor's environmental record," noted Houseal. "Earlier this year, he ruthlessly cut the Environmental Protection Fund. He threatened a moratorium against open space



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"We must send a strong message to the Governor and his budget staff that New York's environment is not expendable," concluded Houseal. "Without a DEC that can effectively do its job, all the gains that have been made in the last 40 years will all be wasted."
Founded in 1975, the Adirondack Council is a privately funded, not-for-profit organization dedicated to ensuring the ecological integrity and wild character of the Adirondack Park. With members in all 50 United States, the Council carries out its mission through research, advocacy, public education and legal action.

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