

Pinelands Preservation Alliance | Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions | American Littoral Society Citizens United for Renewable Energy (CURE) | Clean Water Action | Environment New Jersey | Food and Water Watch | New Jersey Audubon | New Jersey Conservation Foundation | NJ Highlands Coalition | NJ League of Conservation Voters | NJ Sierra Club | People Over Pipelines | ReThink Energy | Save Barnegat Bay | The Watershed Institute

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Governor Murphy Must Reform the Pinelands Commission

Trenton, NJ – The Pinelands National Reserve covers approximately 22% of New Jersey’s land area, and the aquifer within it supplies drinking water to almost one million New Jersey residents. The protection and enhancement of the Pinelands is paramount to the environmental health of New Jersey. Unfortunately, the Pinelands Commission has lost sight of its mission under severe pressure from and significant reorganization by the Governor Christie administration.

A coalition of residents and advocates are calling on Governor Murphy to work with the members of the Commission to bring about a change in leadership and to nominate additional conservation-minded Commissioners. "Appointing smart, passionate people to serve on the Pinelands and other commissions is critical to protecting clean water for this generation and the next. We call on Governor Murphy to take immediate action to fulfill these appointments," says Jennifer M. Coffey, executive director of the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions.

“New Jersey League of Conservation Voters urges Governor Murphy to move his nominations to the Pinelands Commission as quickly as possible to protect one of the crown jewels of our state—the New Jersey Pinelands. Last November, New Jerseyans showed up to the polls to vote for the environment. In fact, nearly 5,000 people signed a petition supporting a change to the Pinelands Commission leadership. Governor Phil Murphy has so far proven himself a conservation leader, propelling New Jersey on the list of the greenest states in America. We are here today to ask the Governor to make critical appointments to the Pinelands with qualified candidates who are committed to protecting clean drinking water, clean air, and open space in our state,” stated executive director, Ed Potosnak.

Alison Mitchell, Policy Director of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation says, "The Pinelands region is uniquely important to New Jersey's environment and identity, and the Pinelands Commission plays a critical role in its protection. We urge Governor Murphy to designate a new chair, and to nominate strong, conservation minded individuals to serve on the commission as soon as possible. Every day that goes by we stand to lose a piece of this international treasure that we are so fortunate to have in our small, densely populated state.”

The Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer, much of which is located in the southern portion of the Delaware River Watershed, supplies virtually all of the water in the streams and wetlands of southern New Jersey as well as contributing water to the Delaware River. Tim Dillingham, executive director of the American Littoral Society explains, “The Pinelands are the headwaters of our bays and estuaries. The health of the coast is linked to the health of the Pines. To protect the coast and ocean, we need to insure the leadership is in place to protect the Pinelands.”

“The health of Barnegat Bay depends upon clean, fresh water entering from the rivers, creeks, and streams whose headwaters start in the Pinelands. It is essential that we have a strong Pinelands

Commission whose policy is guided by science and not political whim. Ocean County and Barnegat Bay in particular rely on strong protections from the Pinelands Commission. We stand strong with the Governor and all of the organizations fighting to protect the Pinelands National Reserve," says Britta Wenzel, Executive Director of Save Barnegat Bay.

The most egregious politicization during the previous administration came in the form of retributive replacements of Commissioners. We need Governor Murphy to depoliticize the Commission by ensuring the leaders and members of the agency will uphold and improve the Comprehensive Management Plan.

"Governor Christie's appointments still control the Pinelands Commission because Governor Murphy has allowed his appointments to remain. If he really cares about protecting the Pinelands, he must make new appointments to the Commission. The first thing he should have done was to remove Sean Earlen as Chair and replaced him with an environmentalist. He has the ability to nominate seven Commissioners but has failed to nominate any. Meanwhile, the Commission has been pushing through pipelines and voted again and again to sell out the Pines to development. This is an urgent situation and Murphy must act," said Jeff Tittel, Director of the New Jersey Sierra Club. "When running, he committed to appoint people who support protecting the Pines to the Commission and so far he has failed to do so. Until changes to the Commission are made, the Pinelands, a U.N. Biosphere reserve and a New Jersey treasure, remains at risk."

Over the past few years, the Pinelands Commission staff has worked to shut the public out of key decision-making steps and prevent the public, including our organizations, from ensuring that the Commission has a complete and accurate presentation of facts and analysis before making important decisions.

The most recent example of this is the Commission staff's effort to eliminate the right of third parties to administratively appeal a recommendation by the Executive Director. The right to appeal arose recently with the Bass River fire tower clearing. This potential elimination is just the latest step in an ongoing process of curtailing public input in order to control the record created to justify decisions, regardless of their merits under the Comprehensive Management Plan. The Commission recently eliminated the requirement to provide notice of Commission actions on developments to individuals who commented on that development at the municipal level, which reduces the amount of public awareness and participation.

"The Pinelands Commission needs to have an independent voice with a fidelity towards the ecology of the Pines and the science underpinning its protections. The Christie Administration enforced Bridgegate-like politics at the Pinelands Commission, working to fire commissioners who wouldn't toe his line," said Doug O'Malley, director of Environment New Jersey. "It's time for a change at the Pinelands Commission. It's time to have a new Pinelands Chair, a new Executive Director and new commissioners that reflect Governor Murphy's commitment to protecting the Pines. We urge the Governor to act now to fulfill his commitment."

We have also seen the Commission review process poorly managed, resulting in unnecessary conflicts (as in the Bass River Fire Tower case), and years-long delays in development decisions (as with the pipelines) and adoption of critical regulatory improvements (including standards to protect the Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer).

It is long past time for new leadership at the Pinelands Commission.

Lena Smith, Senior Organizer Food & Water Watch said, “The Pinelands Commission is essential to protecting the precious Pinelands natural resources. Gas pipeline development threatens the future of the Pinelands. Governor Christie played politics and weakened the integrity of the Pinelands Commission. Governor Murphy committed to protecting the Pinelands and strengthening the commission. He must uphold his promise to the Pinelands and appoint commissioners who will protect and preserve the Pinelands.”

“The Pinelands have withstood decades of threats to its existence, and now isn’t the time to gamble with its future. We are at a crossroads. Preservation of the Pinelands, where 17 trillion gallons of pristine water flows through the Kirkwood -Cohansey aquifer is essential to safe drinking water for South Jersey residents. Governor Murphy must appoint Pinelands commissioners who will fulfill their solemn pledge and mandate to preserve, protect, and enhance the Pinelands and not open it up to industrial and commercial development. The Pinelands are sacrosanct and anyone who doesn’t appreciate, or defend, that position, doesn’t deserve to serve as a commissioner,” stated Janet Tauro, Board Chair of Clean Water Action - NJ.

“We call on Governor Murphy to fix and depoliticize the Pinelands Commission now. Swift action is crucial; as long as the current leadership continues, we will see further poor decision making, assaults on rational, open processes, and violations of the Comprehensive Management Plan. Because of the extent to which the Commission has gotten off track, simply letting the Commission continue without intervention is insufficient to protect the Pinelands. The Pinelands needs Commissioners and leadership who understand the Comprehensive Management Plan, believe in its mission, and will uphold it even under political pressure to do otherwise,” says Jaclyn Rhoads, Assistant Executive Director of Pinelands Preservation Alliance

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