

Elimination of State Environmental Watchdog Part Of Bigger Debate Over State, Federal Budget Cuts



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Connecticut's official environmental watchdog agency is once again threatened with extinction under Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's budget-deficit reduction plan, and environmentalists are warning the governor's timing couldn't be worse.

This year, the survival of the tiny Council on Environmental Quality has become caught up in a broader debate over potential Trump Administration cuts in state aid, ongoing reductions in state funding for environmental programs, and an increasingly urgent search for ways to finance Connecticut's troubled state parks.

Federal environmental and climate programs are expected to be targeted for cuts under President Donald Trump's administration. Recent news reports have cited plans to chop \$2 billion from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and reduce its staff by as much as 20 percent.

State officials fear Connecticut could lose millions of dollars in aid as a result of Trump's plans for the EPA.

Connecticut activists say this state will make the Council on Environmental Quality more significant than ever before, arguing that cutting this watchdog agency's \$175,000 state funding is foolish and shortsighted. A key function of the council is to gather data to produce annual reports on whether Connecticut is achieving its goals to protect and improve this state's environment and to recommend policy changes.

The majority of the Council's budget goes to pay the agency's two full-time staff members. The reports they produce frequently highlight problems facing Connecticut's environment. One recent study looked at the conflict between one state program that spends millions to protect prime farmland and another that offers state incentives for solar projects that are eating up prime farmland.

"In the face of unprecedented cuts within the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection that threaten the agency's ability to serve the public, and the unprecedented silencing of the federal Environmental Protection Agency, the CEQ is needed more than ever," Lynn Werner, executive director of the Housatonic Valley Association, told lawmakers recently.

Two years ago, Malloy proposed folding the council into a catch-all watchdog agency with a reduced budget. Last year, the governor sought to make the council the responsibility of the General Assembly, without providing any funding for its two-person staff. Both plans were rejected.

Malloy and his top aides have defended plans to chop more than \$2.9 million from the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection's \$90 million state funding. They say it's one of many tough choices that need to be made in the struggle to deal with a projected \$1.7 billion state deficit.

"I don't agree that this [governor's] budget is unmanageable," Robert Klee, Malloy's DEEP commissioner, said this week. But he added that, should Trump's threatened cuts to federal environmental programs and state aid come to pass, "That would put us in uncharted territory."

Malloy, one of Trump's harshest critics, is also warning against major reductions in federal environmental programs. "While we have not seen the President's proposed budget, we would urge him not to undo all the great work the EPA has helped to accomplish not only here in Connecticut but nationally as well," Malloy spokesperson Chris Collibee said this week.

"It is ironic," Susan Merrow, chairwoman of the watchdog council, said of Malloy's protests against Trump administration environmental cuts at the same time that Malloy is also chopping environmental funding.

But Merrow said she believes Malloy's motives are strictly budget related and very different from the president's plans to reduce federal environmental regulations and programs. "I don't think Dannel Malloy in any sense could be regarded as being against the environment," Merrow said.

At a legislative meeting last week, several lawmakers from both parties said they don't believe Malloy sees funding environmental programs as a high priority in this budget crisis.

Federal money makes up more than a quarter of overall funding for Klee's agency. Some reports indicate Trump is considering a 30 percent reduction in federal Environmental Protection Agency grants to the states, cuts that could chop \$9.3 million in federal funding for Connecticut.

"At a time when our environment is under severe attack at the federal level, the responsibility for protecting and preserving our precious natural resources is now being left entirely up to the states," Lori Brown, executive director of the Connecticut League of Conservation Voters, testified at a recent public hearing.

"Connecticut must not weaken our existing environmental laws or roll back funding that is so desperately needed to protect the environment now more than ever," Brown said during last month's hearing. "The CEQ is the only governmental entity able to effectively report on how well our state is doing in protecting our land, air, water, wildlife and climate."

The co-chairman of the legislature's environment committee, Sen. Ted Kennedy Jr., said he believes money will be found to keep the council operating, "but I don't know at what level."

Kennedy said the debate over funding the council is also wrapped up in discussions about other environmental program cuts and the efforts to find new ways to pay for our state park system. Advocates fear cuts could delay or dramatically reduce summer staffing, maintenance, and camping at state parks.

"Our state parks are in a crisis right now," Kennedy warned at a legislative meeting last week. Park funding alternatives under discussion include dedicating money from a 5-cent tax on single-use shopping bags to the park system, or giving motorists the option when they register vehicles to pay \$10 for a pass to gain free entry to all state parks.

The big risk of eliminating the Council on Environmental Quality, according to Brown, is that it's the only agency charged with warning when the state is losing ground on critical environmental issues.

"Who's going to know if no one is looking?" Brown asked.