

For Immediate Release

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Environmental community calls on PA House to reject budget that sacrifices clean air, clean water and public health

[September 12, 2017 - Harrisburg, PA] – As the Pennsylvania State House of Representatives returns to session to consider revenue packages for the state budget, environmental leaders gathered with local citizens in the Capitol on Tuesday to deliver a message: **the proposed budget is a raw deal for all Pennsylvanians. The current plan presents unprecedented changes to environmental protections amid riders that would compromise air quality, water quality and public health.**

The groups slammed the use of revenue-related budget bills to pass industry-friendly policies that could never stand on their own merit, a form of legislative overreach that is becoming an annual tradition in Harrisburg. Further, the groups highlighted the 1700 comments generated from Pennsylvania residents, directed to the legislature and Governor Wolf, opposing passage of a budget that continues to include ill-advised riders.

The Tax Code Bill (HB 542), passed by the Pennsylvania Senate and supported by Governor Tom Wolf, includes provisions that would create a new Air Quality Permit Advisory Committee to approve any air quality permits meant to regulate emissions from oil and gas operations, marking the first time in history a legislatively-dominated body would have veto authority over any environmental regulation or permit.

The bill also includes a rider that would allow the oil and gas industry to hand pick their own third-party, fee-for-hire agents to review and approve their permit applications if the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) doesn't do so within a set time frame.

“The Pennsylvania Senate’s ill-advised provisions in the budget bills would be devastating to our air and water across the state,” said Matt Walker, Community Outreach Director with Clean Air Council. “Pennsylvania families who live near shale gas facilities are *already* forced to breathe harmful methane pollution and deal with other negative impacts of the industry - these provisions would only add insult to injury. Our group of environmental organizations, collectively representing nearly a million Pennsylvanians, are calling on the Pennsylvania legislature and Governor Wolf to protect Pennsylvania families by passing a clean budget and rejecting *any* budget deal that contains environmental riders that put our air and water at risk.”

"As a mother of two young boys living in heavily fracked Butler County, I know there is no justification to trade away the only public health protections Pennsylvania's children have from natural gas pollution in a bad budget deal," said Patrice Tomcik, Organizer for Moms Clean Air Force. "This bad budget deal has a plan to replace air experts at the Department of Environmental Protection with a committee of political appointees, stacked in favor of the oil and gas industry that would reduce the Department's ability to oversee the natural gas industry. In other words, this plan would give industry a free pass to pollute and sicken our children."

"The Pennsylvania Senate's willingness to put the future of our air and water in the oil and gas industry's hands, with the support of Gov. Wolf, is unnecessary and unacceptable," said Sarah Martik of the Center for Coalfield Justice. "We absolutely cannot afford to give oil and gas companies the ability to hire their own third parties to issue permits. The permitting process is one of the few ways a community has a voice to speak out and be heard on projects that threaten their health and homes. If the industry wants permits to be issued more quickly, they should support a budget that fully funds the Department of Environmental Protection."

Riders jammed into in the Administrative Code Bill (HB 118) also drew the ire of the environmental groups. These riders included allowing wastewater treatment facilities to continue accepting and discharging conventional oil and gas drilling wastewater under long-expired permits, and restricting DEP's ability to implement a water quality standard for manganese, a toxic metal.

"Every year over 100 million gallons of conventional gas wastewater, which contains heavy metals such as arsenic, a variety of hazardous chemicals, radionuclides, and high levels of salts, is still discharged to rivers and streams, particularly impacting the Allegheny River," said Myron Arnowitz of Clean Water Action. "It's disgraceful to allow these facilities to continue to pollute our waterways by letting them operate under weaker standards in violation of an EPA order and the Clean Water Act."

"Pennsylvania legislators are once again attempting to brazenly throw our families, farms, health and environment under the bus, this time by using the budget process to limit water quality protections for our streams and rivers from manganese, a toxic metal," said Faith Zerbe, Delaware Riverkeeper Network. "It is time our elected officials get the message that it's not okay to infringe on our Constitutional Rights under Article 1, Section 27 of the Pennsylvania Constitution just to give more gifts to the drillers and coal industry that repeatedly wound our community, forests, streams and drinking water."

The event was sponsored by Clean Air Council, Clean Water Action, Center for Coalfield Justice, Delaware Riverkeeper Network, Environmental Defense Fund, Moms Clean Air Force, Mountain Watershed Association, National Resources Defense Council, PennFuture, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and Sierra Club.

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