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SMITH BILL TO FUND PROTECTION OF STATE'S WATER SUPPLIES HEARD IN COMMITTEE

TRENTON -A bill sponsored by Senator Bob Smith which would create the "New Jersey Clean Water, Drought Mitigation and Water Resource Security Trust Fund" to provide a stable funding source for Statewide and local water quality and security purposes was discussed in the Senate Environment Committee today.

"For too long, funding for clean water projects has been hit or miss in the Garden State, but I assure you that we cannot afford to miss any longer when it comes to the quality and safety of our drinking water," said Senator Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset, Chairman of the Senate Environment Committee. "This dedicated trust fund would ensure that the State meets its obligations to protect its citizens by assuring them of the quality of the water they consume and that an adequate supply of water will be available for the future."

The bill, S-192, would establish the "New Jersey Clean Water, Drought Mitigation and Water Resource Security Trust Fund" under the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), which would be derived from a water consumption fee of three cents per thousand gallons consumed. According to Senator Smith, New Jersey industries would be expected to contribute approximately \$5 million, and the average household would experience a rise in their annual water bill of \$2.40, to raise an estimated \$11.2 million per year for the fund.

"For a very nominal increase in the average water bill, we would be able to collect the funds to protect our State's water resources, mitigate droughts, and protect them from terrorist attacks," said Senator Smith. "For less than the cost of two or three bottles of water, New Jersey's homeowners will be able to purchase peace of mind in knowing that the 80,000 gallons of water a year that they use in their homes is safe and contaminant-free."

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The fund would be administered by the DEP to go towards funding a number of projects, including the training of water supply personnel in water security measures. Senator

Smith added that having a trained staff at our State's water supplies is both necessary in the post-September 11th world, and may act as a deterrent to terrorists who may attempt to contaminate the State's water resources.

"This is a particularly poignant issue considering the heightened state of security we are forced to live in every day," said Senator Smith. "With Monday's contamination of the federal Senate offices at the Hart building in Washington, D.C., we have yet again been reminded of the ever-present threat of terrorism to our country. However, having a thoroughly-trained support staff at our water facilities, who can recognize and respond to terroristic activities, will not only give the State the ability to act quickly in response to eco-terrorists, but may also deter those terrorists from attacking the State's water supplies in the first place."

The bill would also provide funds for drought mitigation programs, and fund the diversion of water from one water source to another during a state of water emergency or to avert a drought emergency in the State. Senator Smith said that the historic drought two years ago, and the multiple droughts New Jersey has experienced in recent years, has shown the need for a "rainy day" fund, to be able to ease drought conditions in times of need.

"With the increased rain and snow we've received in recent months, it almost seems crazy to be talking about drought mitigation, but the fact of the matter is that we are only two years removed from one of the worst droughts in State history, and we've experienced five droughts in the last 13 years," said Senator Smith. "Droughts are cyclical, and it's only a matter of time before the next big drought hits, and water restrictions are again imposed which not only affect household water usage, but also represent a hardship for businesses. Having this fund in place, we will be able to take measures to avoid having to impose those harsh water restrictions."

Senator Smith said that the bill will be voted on at the next Senate Environment Committee meeting on February 24. He added that an additional bill will be considered in the near future to provide constitutional dedication of the trust fund, so that it is immune from being diverted to other sources.

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