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Opinion

Benson's poor record

The importance of the next election for those who want to protect the state's environment became clear this week with the report by a bipartisan group on the governor's conservation record.

The Granite State Conservation Voters Alliance gave Gov. Craig Benson an overall C- for his conservation efforts.

The alliance, formed last year, includes both Democrats and Republicans, private citizens and former elected officials. Its purpose is to make office holders accountable for their environmental records and make conservation issues a priority at election time.

The alliance's report should be taken seriously, despite Benson's charge that it is politically motivated and unfair to his record.

Tourism, outdoor recreation, the forest products industry, and agriculture are just some major parts of the state's economy that depend on a healthy environment. Clean air and water also have a direct affect on public health. A healthy environment is a fundamental part of the quality of life here, and is named by a majority of people as part of what makes New Hampshire the most "livable state."

The voters alliance assessed the state's performance under Benson's leadership in eight areas: land protection; drinking water safety; wetland, lake and river protection; wildlife protection; transportation; energy and clean air; smart growth; and global warming.

The group asked state commissioners and agency directors with responsibilities in these areas for information to guide their assessment. But they were ignored by the heads of the departments of Environmental Services, Resources and Economic Development, and the Office of Energy and Planning. The alliance used outside policy specialists in addition to its own members' expertise to analyze the areas, and its report includes accomplishments, as well as areas of concern.

Unfortunately, the areas of concern far outweigh the accomplishments.

One of the bigger environmental black eyes is the drastic cuts in LCHIP, the state's Land Conservation and Heritage Investment Program. This initiative leverages far more private money than it costs the state, and has been responsible for protecting historic and cultural sites – like Littleton's Opera House and the Sunset Hill Golf Course – as well as traditional conservation area like forests and lakes. In this biennial budget, LCHIP's funding was cut by 90 percent. The LCHIP cuts, combined with severe cutbacks in the water supply land protection program, earned Benson a D for land protection.

Despite Benson's joining other New England governors in lawsuits against the federal government's relaxing of clean air standards for power plants, the voters alliance still gives him D on global warming. The leading proponent of aggressive state enforcement on climate issues, according to the alliance, was now deposed Attorney General Peter Heed. Benson himself has done little to continue what had been the Granite State's regional leadership in this area. According to the alliance, it is Benson's inaction in many areas that hurts environmental policy. The inaction includes failure to process federal grants for local environmental protection programs, not implementing plans and policies already in place, and weakening wetland protection measures. It gave Benson grades ranging from C to D in the eight policy areas. The Hummer-driving governor (whose Web site touts a contest to "Fuel Up For Fun" by purchasing 11 or more gallons of gasoline a week) hasn't linked the importance of environmental protection to the state's overall prosperity. He departs from the leadership of past governors of both parties who supported innovative new land conservation funding programs including the current use tax system, clean power standards, and important new laws protecting shorelands.

