

‘A REALLY GOOD SESSION’

Conservationists Report Successes Of Lobbying

Posted: April 10, 2014

By JONATHON SHACAT

HARRISONBURG — The 2014 General Assembly session was a success for pollution-free energy and climate-change efforts, but there is more work to be done, according to a lobbyist for environmental causes.

“This was actually a really good session for us. We do not have too many bad bills that passed, and we had a lot of good bills that did pass,” said Chelsea Harnish, a policy and campaign manager with Virginia Conservation Network, which focuses on climate and energy.

“This is my sixth General Assembly session lobbying, and I would definitely say it was up there as one of my favorites,” she added, while speaking during the Climate Action Alliance forum on Tuesday in Harrisonburg.

One success, Harnish said, was the passage of a law exempting all solar equipment from the state’s machinery and tools tax.

“Virginia is the only state in the country that applies [that tax],” she said. “Harrisonburg does not apply that particular tax to solar equipment, but other counties and jurisdictions did, up until this year.”

It may seem like a small measure, but it’s significant because the tax was cost-prohibitive for planning larger solar projects, she added.

Harnish also reported the repeal of the \$64 annual tax on hybrid-electric vehicles that went into effect July 1. The tax was a small part of an overall transportation bill package passed last year by the General Assembly.

State officials have said repealing the tax will reduce by about \$11 million the revenue generated by the funding package, which was projected to raise \$1 billion a year for roads and mass transit.



Chelsea Harnish, policy and campaign manager with Virginia Conservation Network, speaks during a Climate Action Alliance forum in Harrisonburg on Tuesday. Harnish says the 2014 General Assembly session was a success for climate-change efforts, but more needs to be done. (Photo by Jonathon Shacat / DN-R)

Another success was the establishment of a subcommittee to study the effects of flooding due to sea-level rise in coastal Virginia.

The 11-member panel will consist of senators, delegates and some members of the public. A report is anticipated in the fall, she said.

The role that climate change plays in rising sea levels and what to do about it continues to be debated among policymakers.

While the generally accepted belief of the scientific community is that climate change is at least partially the result of human activity, some scientists say it is essentially a natural, cyclical process that has occurred throughout Earth's history.

One bill supported by the Virginia Conservation Network that was not passed would have required the Department of Environmental Quality to review hydraulic fracturing regulations in the Taylorsville Basin, which is between Fredericksburg and the Chesapeake Bay.

Hydraulic fracturing, commonly referred to as fracking, is used to extract natural gas and petroleum from rock formations. The drilling process shoots a mixture of water and chemicals into the ground to break up rock beneath the earth and release oil or gas trapped within it.

Industry officials say the method is safe, but opponents say it pollutes groundwater and poses other risks to the environment and public health.

Fracking in the basin is worrisome, she said, not only for "typical fracking concerns that are coming out of Pennsylvania and West Virginia, but also because this is an area where the water table is close to the ground."

"It's a huge drinking water reservoir for the folks in that area, plus it drains right into a national treasure, the Chesapeake Bay," she said.

The bill passed the Senate with bipartisan support but failed in committee in the House of Delegates. Harnish said she is hopeful that the legislation will be more successful if reintroduced next year.

Contact Jonathon Shacat at 574-6286 or jshacat@dnronline.com