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Environmental measures riding rough water

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(April 20, 2004) — ALBANY — It could be rough sledding for the environmental agenda this year in the state Legislature.

The goals include closing the Indian Point nuclear plants, expanding the bottle-deposit bill, expanding wetlands protection and prohibiting backyard trash burning. But none of the items has caught fire at the Capitol, where school funding and county fiscal woes have dominated.

"It's always a long shot for any environmental bill," said Laura Haight of the New York Public Interest Research Group, one of several activists who spoke at the annual Earth Day Lobby Day on Monday.

About 400 activists rallied on the Capitol lawn, singing songs and chanting slogans about pollution and energy. On a sun-splashed day, they had a large audience of mostly state workers on lunch break. The activists also met with their local senators and Assembly members, urging them to sign on to some of the issues.

The environmental bill with perhaps the best odds this year may be the bottle bill — its chances aided by the state's fiscal problems.

Environmentalists want water, juices and other noncarbonated drinks to carry a nickel deposit, just like beer and soda do now. They also want to tweak the law so that beverage distributors don't get to keep the deposit for bottles that customers fail to return. (The original bottle-deposit law aimed to reduce litter by giving consumers an incentive to return bottles and claim the nickel deposit per bottle.)

The changes could bring the state another \$180 million per year, activists claim. Their pitch: that money could come in handy when the state is facing a \$5 billion shortfall, huge Medicaid and pension costs and a court order to boost spending on New York City schools.

"It seems to me, somewhere along the way, someone is going to need \$180 million," Haight said.

The Democrat-led Assembly has for years backed the idea of expanding the bottle bill, while the Republican-controlled Senate has opposed it. Republican Gov. George Pataki has given the idea the cold shoulder, but hasn't ruled it out completely.

Some supporters hope the Assembly will use the bottle bill as a bargaining chip on the state budget, which has been stalled.

But some acknowledged that an environmental victory last year — an agreement to provide \$120 million to the Superfund, the state's main cleanup program, and \$15 million to target abandoned industrial sites known as "brownfields" — eases the pressure on legislators to pass green bills this year.

Some groups also called on Pataki and lawmakers to shutter the Indian Point nuclear power plants in Buchanan, Westchester County, noting that tens of millions of people live within a 50-mile radius, that safety can't be guaranteed and that the facilities could be terrorist targets.