

August 8, 2008

Land panel's work delayed

Beshear must name members

By James Bruggers

jbruggers@courier-journal.com

Every five days, Kentucky loses roughly one square mile of wildlife habitat to development or land conversion -- about 73 square miles in a year.

That was among the conclusions in January of a state task force assigned to address the problem, then told by the 2008 General Assembly to continue its work.

But more than four months later, the task force has yet to meet again -- held up while participants wait for Gov. Steve Beshear to make four additional appointments.

The delay has frustrated Rep. Robin Webb, D-Grayson, co-chairwoman of the Land Stewardship and Conservation Task Force, as well as an environmental group that sees the task force's mission as vital and time-sensitive.

"He needs to make the appointments," Webb said of the governor, adding that she's not sure why it has taken so long. Kentucky is "very behind" other states in land stewardship and conservation, she said.

When asked this week by The Courier-Journal, Beshear spokesman Jay Blanton said the appointments could come next week.

"The governor is steadfast in his commitment to land stewardship and conservation," Blanton said. "That's why his team has taken a methodical ... approach to selecting the best possible appointments to this important task force."

Kentucky Conservation Committee leaders who have pressed for the task force said they have had trouble getting anyone in the governor's office or at the Legislative Research Commission, which provides staff for the task force, to let them know when the group can resume its work.

The task force is charged with developing a proposal for a statewide coordinating council in time for next year's legislative session, and recommendations for funding strategies by the 2010 session.

Potential strategies range from giving private landowners more incentives to take care of their farms and forests to more outright public purchases, according to a task force report.

David Wicks, a Louisville educator and member of the board of the Kentucky Conservation Committee, said Kentucky's "land is too important to all of us to allow it to be subdivided and subdivided."

He said the state's land "is the image and the soul of Kentucky" and that today's children "are growing up without the opportunity to turn over rocks in streams, poke around in forests, go fishing or just go for a walk along in a pristine forest."

The conservation committee has made land protection a key part of its upcoming annual meeting on Sept. 20 at Blackacre State Nature Preserve in Jefferson County.

Reporter James Bruggers can be reached at (502) 582-4645.
