

President Bush has proposed slashing \$25 million from Chesapeake Bay programs and deals a staggering blow to cleanup efforts, a bay watchdog group said this morning.

The budget sent to Congress yesterday includes cuts to programs that fund sewage treatment plant upgrades, research, land preservation and would eliminate the Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network. The Annapolis-based program got \$1.5 million this year for public education and improving boating access to the bay.

Kim Coble, Maryland executive director of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, said the cuts would mean bay cleanup efforts will get half the funding of similar programs in the Great Lakes.

"It's devastating," she said. "It's hard to imagine a budget worse for bay restoration or protection."

The spending blueprint for the 2007 budget year that begins Oct. 1 would provide large increases for the military and homeland security but would trim spending in the one-sixth of the budget that covers the rest of discretionary spending. Nine Cabinet agencies would see outright reductions with the biggest percentage cuts occurring in the departments of Transportation, Justice and Agriculture.

Mr. Bush's budget has faced predictable criticism from Democrats but it is also facing attacks from Republicans.

This morning, the administration defended Mr. Bush's \$2.77 trillion budget plan this morning against congressional attacks that the cuts it sought to deal with exploding budget deficits would unfairly harm government efforts in education, health care and environmental programs.

Treasury Secretary John Snow, among leadoff witnesses in a series of congressional hearings in Washington, said the administration had made the tough choices to fund programs that were working and eliminate those that were not.

"This budget represents the president's dedication to fiscal discipline, an efficient federal government and the continuation of a thriving U.S. economy," Mr. Snow told the Senate Finance Committee.

The cuts to bay programs represent a \$25 million shortfall from what Congress provided this fiscal year, according to numbers provided by U.S. Sen. Paul Sarbanes, D-Md. Cuts include:

The Clean Water State Revolving Fund - States surrounding the bay - Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania - and Washington would see \$17.8 million less from the fund, which pays for upgrades to sewage treatment plants to reduce nutrient pollution. Nationwide, the fund is being cut from \$887 to \$668 million.

The Environmental Protection Agency's Chesapeake Bay Program - Based in Eastport, the watershed restoration program would get \$20.4 million, \$350,000 less than in the current budget.

Land preservation - Various funds would be cut about \$4 million.

NOAA - The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration's Bay Program office in Annapolis would be cut from \$3.5 million to \$1.9 million. The program provides scientific support for bay cleanup efforts.

Ms. Coble also lamented the proposed elimination of \$2 million in grants for local groups seeking to improve streams leading to the Bay.

A spokesman for Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. could not be reached for comment this morning.

But Democratic lawmakers in Washington criticized the cuts to bay programs.

While he was pleased to see the EPA bay program's funding remain stable, U.S. Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin, D-Baltimore, said he was "very concerned" about cuts to the revolving loan fund for sewer plants and the NOAA's Bay Program office.

"These are all important programs in helping restore the health of the Bay," said Mr. Cardin, who is seeking his party's nomination for Senate.

"The President's proposal leaves us far short of the amount necessary to significantly improve the health of the Chesapeake Bay," said U.S. Rep. Steny Hoyer, D-St. Mary's.

"By eliminating or cutting a number of programs critical to Bay cleanup, the administration once again demonstrates its lack of commitment to the future of this national treasure."

Audra Miller, spokesman for the Maryland Republican Party, dismissed the Democrats' attacks as "more empty rhetoric from the state Democratic Party in their attempt to coronate Ben Cardin."

Mr. Cardin is a leading candidate in the race to replace Mr. Sarbanes.

Ms. Coble was hopeful a public backlash against the cuts would save bay restoration funds.

"This definitely is an emergency condition for the Bay and it needs a real outcry of outrage from the governor, our Congressional delegation and our legislature," she said.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.