GOVERNOR BESHEAR SPARES MORGAN COUNTY TREE NURSERY

Gov. Steve Beshear has decided to fully rebuild a state tree nursery in eastern Kentucky that had been devastated by a tornado last year. The state had been considering to divert insurance claim money to fill a budget gap.

The Kentucky Forest Industries Association and the Kentucky Woodland Owners Association met with Secretary of the Governor’s Executive Cabinet Mary Lassiter and state Budget Director Jane Driskell to explain the importance of maintaining the state nursery operation and the effects of a possible closure on landowners and the wood industry in Kentucky. The groups stressed the importance of the seedlings grown there and how they are vital for both the environment and the economy. Also in attendance at the meeting was state Representative John Will Stacy and representatives of House Leadership.

The Kentucky Division of Forestry had received an insurance settlement of $3.3 million to rebuild the nursery to modern standards. Less than half of that money had been spent, with construction stopped pending a decision on whether to use the remaining insurance settlement money to help fund other state operations to close other budget gaps.

“The nursery is an important resource for our forest industry, mine and stream reclamation efforts, and land owners and it impacts the regional economy all around Morgan County,” the governor said in a written statement.

The rebuilt nursery at West Liberty in Morgan County will be more efficient, helping the state produce more than 3 million seedlings each year at its two nurseries, the governor said. The other nursery is in western Kentucky.

“We are very pleased,” said Leah MacSwords, the director of the Division of Forestry. She said it will allow construction of a new seedling processing building with better cooling and more mechanization.

Bob Bauer, executive director of the Kentucky Forest Industries Association, praised the decision as one that will help the environment and a Kentucky forest products industry that directly employs over 25,000 people.

Losing the nursery or even a large portion of its production would be a big blow to conservation in the state, Kurt Mason, a Louisville-based conservationist with the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service, told the Courier Journal. He said many of the nursery’s seedlings, in addition to others from the Western Kentucky nursery, are used by farmers to replant stream and river corridors to help improve water quality.

He said landowners buy them to restore forests, and county conservation districts throughout Kentucky offer them to students, who take trees home and plant them in their yards and neighborhoods - including several thousand that went to Louisville area students this year.

The Division of Forestry has been cut back this year by consolidating its offices and reducing staffing from 174 earlier this year to the current 154 resulting in a reduction of funding of $1.2 million. It had as many as 240 employees a decade ago.